



**HOW SMES HARNESS THE POWER OF SOCIAL  
MEDIA: FROM AN ORGANISATIONAL IMPRESSION  
MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE**

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## ABSTRACT

Organisational impression management (OIM) has increasingly attracted scholarly attentions in recent years. Existing studies mainly focus on OIM within large firm settings or individual-level IM enacted by entrepreneurs. Thus, OIM practiced by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) as a collective on social media is still underdeveloped. Driven by the specified research gaps, this study seeks to explore how OIM is practiced by SMEs on social media. This is done through connecting three interrelated bodies of knowledge: OIM, SMEs, and social media literature to inform corresponding queries that are directed towards a) the desired organisational images/impressions SMEs tend to make online; b) the OIM strategies employed by SMEs on social media; and c) the organisational qualities that have affected SMEs' OIM practice on social media. With a purposively selected sample of 8 SMEs (i.e. in the sector labelled as 'creative, arts and entertainment activities' in FAME database) in Northwest of England, this qualitative research is carried out adopting a multiple-case study approach featuring data collected from three sources: 1) firm manifestos; 2) social media postings; and 3) key informant interviews. The collected data is analysed through a thematic analysis approach. This study yields findings in three aspects: 1) four organisational impressions including professionalism, creativity, social responsibility, and attractiveness; 2) a taxonomy of OIM strategies consisting of qualification-oriented and relationship-oriented strategies; and 3) seven organisational qualities that can be classified into three categories: individual quality (i.e. nature of practitioner), enterprise qualities (i.e. division of roles and responsibilities, work routine, work principle, & evaluation system), and business environment qualities (i.e. nature of industry & functionality of social media). Also, a triangulation of findings is conducted to indicate that 1) making desired impressions is not the primary goal of SMEs' social media activities; and 2) OIM practice tends to remain consistent across micro, small, and medium firms, although the generalisability of the results is limited due to small sample. This study mainly contributes to the OIM literature by extending the widely adopted theoretical framework of OIM developed by Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo (1999) and key propositions in OIM literature including 'team performance in perpetuating organisational impressions', 'frontstage and backstage analogy', and 'social cues in mediated communications' (Goffman, 1959; Rettie, 2009; Solomon et al., 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016).

## **To my parents**

I still remember the look on your face when you insisted on giving me an opportunity to fulfil my dream overseas, regardless of the doubts from our relatives – I saw perseverance;

I still remember the tone of your voice when you told me to focus on my study without sparing even the slightest effort to worry about the money – I heard perseverance;

I still remember the words you said when I told you that I struggled with my life abroad. You said ‘keep going, son’ – I felt perseverance.

I will abide by this perseverance and pass it onto the next generation. I am truly proud of being born and raised in this family.

I have only met you twice in the last 7 years and now I can finally spend some time with you until I set sail again.

## **To the most trustworthy companion, the source of my resilience, confidence, and happiness, during this PhD journey: My beloved wife, Catherine**

We have eventually made to this stage. I cannot express how grateful I am for your presence all the way from the beginning, when I was merely a spoiled boy. You made a man out of me and I am more than willing to spend the rest of my life to repay your unconditional encouragement, support, trust, and love, although to the best of my knowledge, I am forever in your debt.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Introduction

In recent years, Organisational Impression Management (OIM) has increasingly been employed by scholars as the main theory to interpret the image-shaping behaviours of organisations (e.g. Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014; Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Benthous, Risius, & Beck, 2016; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016). In this regard, social media has been constantly employed by organisations as a means to shape, maintain, and restore their images perceived by key stakeholders (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Benthous, Risius, & Beck, 2016). Although social media has been widely adopted by Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) to connect with their target audiences (Chen et al., 2008; Ainin et al., 2015; Atanassova & Clark, 2015), prior studies mainly concentrate on OIM practised by large firms (e.g. Zaharopoulos & Kwok, 2017) or individual-level IM enacted by entrepreneurs (e.g. Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014). In other words, existing literature exploring how OIM is practised by SMEs on social media is limited and this is what the present study aims to address.

This introductory chapter consists of seven sections. In *Section 1.2*, the rationale and background of this thesis is outlined. This section introduces the subject, Organisational Impression Management (OIM), the contexts in which this study was undertaken (Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises – SMEs and social media) by addressing respectively 1) how OIM has been developed from the individual level to the organisational level; 2) how OIM is applied in the context of SMEs; and 3) how OIM is applied in the context of social media. In *Section 1.3*, the research aim and corresponding research questions are provided. Further, *Section 1.4* maps out the methodological design of this study. Moreover, both theoretical and practical

contributions of this study are summed up in *Section 1.5*. Finally, in *Section 1.6*, an outline of all the chapters in this thesis is provided to specify how the thesis is organised.

## **1.2 Rationale and Background**

### **1.2.1 Organisational Impression Management (OIM)**

The past decades have witnessed an escalating interest in the phenomena of OIM (see for example, Bolino et al., 2008; Mohamed & Gardner, 2004; Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014; Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015) both as an organisational strategy and as a managerial practice. The conceptualisation of OIM derives from Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model of social interaction in which individuals are metaphorically portrayed as 'actors' delivering crafted 'performances' in front of 'audiences'. Evidently, the antecedent of OIM was contextualised at the interpersonal level (i.e. 'actors' refer to individuals) until more recently it was applied to the organizational settings ('actors' refer to organisations), seeking to interpret organisational phenomena (Bolino et al., 2008). Key constructs regarding OIM also derive from Goffman's (1959) conceptualisation including 'team performance', 'backstage and frontstage analogy', and 'social cues in mediated conversations', which jointly contribute to the theorisation of IM when applied at the organisational level (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). In this study, OIM is defined as '*any action that is purposefully designed and carried out to influence an audience's perceptions of the organization*' (Elsbach, Sutton, & Principe, 1998: p. 68). A wide range of OIM strategies have been formulated to shape desired images. Among these OIM strategies, Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo's (1999) taxonomy, in which many prevalent OIM strategies were characterised, is most extensively used in recent

publications (e.g. Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015; Windscheid et al., 2016; Benthaus, Risius, & Beck, 2016).

Many existing OIM studies have documented that IM has been successfully extended to, and even pervasively implemented, at the organizational level (e.g. Mohamed & Gardner, 2004; Bolino et al., 2008; Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014; Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015). To be specific, OIM literature has often been employed to interpret other constructs in organizational studies such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) (e.g. Perks et al., 2013; Tata & Prasad, 2015), corporate communication (e.g. Solomon et al., 2013; Zaharopoulos & Kwok, 2017), financial performance (e.g. Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013), and strategy-making practice (e.g. Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017). From a methodological perspective, the usage of various approaches (e.g. ethnography, case study, survey, and content analysis) has secured OIM's capacity to accommodate research with different paradigms (Bolino et al., 2008). Finally, extant OIM literature demonstrates that data can be collected from a variety of sources including hospital billings (e.g. Elsbach et al., 1998), verbal announcements of spokespersons (e.g. Elsbach, 1994), notification letters to customers (e.g. Jenkins, Anandarajan, & D'Ovidio, 2014), corporate annual reports (e.g. Arndt & Bigelow, 2000), and corporate websites (e.g. Bansal & Kistruck, 2006). The plurality of data sources has again added to the richness of the literature. In short, all of the above features regarding the existing OIM literature help to better understand how organizations function in diversified contexts.

Despite the increased scholarly attention on the subject, the existing OIM literature is limited, since prior literature indicates that new OIM strategies or new ways of using existing strategies have been developed to cater for changing organisational needs and

its contexts (e.g. Bansal & Kistruck, 2006; Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015; Graffin, Halebian, & Kiley, 2016). For instance, Bansal & Kistruck (2006) found that, in order to dispel public doubts about the environmental pollution associated with their products/services, two new OIM strategies were formulated and they are ‘demonstrative strategies’, which mainly concentrate on specific facts and details of what the firm has done to protect the environment, and ‘illustrative strategies’, which focus on verbal comments by which the firm’s commitment to external environment is communicated to the public. Moreover, new dimensions have been added to the way OIM strategies were defined. For instance, Sandberg & Holmlund (2015) derived eight OIM strategies that firms used in sustainability reporting in an attempt to demonstrate their sustainability-centric actions. Among the eight OIM strategies, four are specific to rhetorical styles (i.e. ‘subjective’, ‘positive’, ‘vague’, and ‘emotional’) adopted by firms in presenting their sustainability (Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015). Sandberg & Holmlund (2015) in their paper innovatively synthesized four rhetorical styles and regarded them as OIM strategies, given that little earlier research managed to do so. Further, some of the established OIM strategies have been extended by more recent scholarly inquiries. For instance, Graffin, Halebian, & Kiley (2016), drawing on expectancy violation theory, proposed a new technique, ‘impression offsetting’, which in fact extended the notion of anticipatory OIM strategies that was first illustrated by studies such as Elsbach, Sutton, & Principe (1988). As a consequence, it is affirmed that new strategies could be developed to adapt to diverse organisational contexts. The following sections introduce how OIM is applied in the context of SMEs and social media.



### **1.2.2 SMEs**

It is indicated that OIM, being not exclusive to large corporations, can also be extended to SMEs (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Tang, Khan, & Zhu, 2012; Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014). In this study, an SME is defined as an enterprise with its headcount (i.e. number of staff members) ranging from 1 to 249 (European Commission, 2016), since it has been extensively used across Western European countries and it allows for little ambiguity especially for undertaking the sampling process (Volery & Maazarol, 2015). Since 1970s, there has been a growing policy interest in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the UK (Deakins & Freel, 2012; Stokes & Wilson, 2006; Storey & Greene, 2010). For instance, the department for Business, Enterprise, and Regulatory Reform (BERR) was established with the overall aim of optimizing the function of small firms in society (BERR, 2008). In general, SMEs and entrepreneurship are widely acknowledged as a key source of dynamism, innovation, and flexibility in most advanced industrial countries (Storey & Greene, 2010; Stokes & Wilson, 2006). It is widely acknowledged that SMEs constitute an indispensable component of the economy due to their conspicuous contributions to economic growth and job creation (Acs & Mueller, 2008; Henrekson & Johansson, 2010; BPE, 2015; Deakins & Freel, 2012). In 2015, there were approximately 5.2 million SMEs which occupied 99.9% (among which small firms accounted for 99.3% and medium-sized accounted for 0.6%) of all private sector businesses in UK at the start of 2015. These SMEs, as a collective, accounted for 47% of private sector annual turnover (BPE, 2015). Further, SMEs accounted for 60% of private sector employment (BPE, 2015). It is suggested that SMEs' potential capacity for new job creation fuels the continuation of economic growth (Acs & Mueller, 2008; Henrekson & Johansson, 2010).

There are a variety of fundamental differences between SMEs and large firms (Volery & Mazzarol, 2015) as SMEs often suffer external uncertainty including 1) constrained access to market power (Stokes & Wilson, 2006; Storey & Greene, 2010); 2) dependency upon customer loyalty (van de Ven and Jeurissen, 2005; Gras-Gil et al., 2016; Galbreath, 2017), local communities (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017), and inter-organisational collaborations (Muscio, 2007; Maskell & Malmberg, 1999; Waalkens et al., 2004); 3) vulnerability to failure (Honjo, 2000; Harhoff et al., 1998); and 4) unstable source of funding (Ang, 1991; Saridakis et al., 2008). Also, SMEs and large corporations differ sharply in the managerial style associated with leadership (Cosh et al., 2005; Stokes & Wilson, 2006; Mazzarole, 2014), internal organization (Curran & Blackburn, 2001), and employee training and recruitment (Carroll et al., 1999; Storey, 2005). Additionally, unlike large firms, SMEs are more motivated to exploit and commercialise innovations (Van Praag & Versloot, 2007; Thomas et al., 2004), since they are unlikely to benefit from scale economies (Rangone, 1999; Man et al., 2002) and they are strategically flexible (Pelham, 2000; Durand & Coeurderoy, 2001; Man et al., 2002). Finally, SMEs usually benefit from their relationship with local communities, whereas large firms normally do not share the same level of intimacy between their staff members and local residents (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017).

Despite SMEs' contribution to the society, there is little research exploring OIM applications in SMEs. The bulk of the empirical OIM studies are centred upon large corporations (e.g. Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Perks et al., 2013; Conway, O'Keefe, & Hrasky, 2015; Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015; Tata & Prasad, 2015; Windscheid et al., 2016; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016; Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017; Zaharopoulos & Kwok, 2017) and the most frequently used

taxonomy of OIM strategies is based on large firms (i.e. Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). It is noteworthy that prior studies focusing on SMEs' OIM practice have derived from an entrepreneurial perspective (e.g. Benson et al., 2015; Yusuf, 2011; Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014; Tang, Khan, & Zhu, 2012), as these two terms, entrepreneurship and SMEs, are conflated in many scholarly inquiries, although they are not completely interchangeable under all circumstances (Deakins & Freel, 2012; Stokes & Wilson, 2006). To be specific, many studies within this realm have prioritized the role of entrepreneurs as the organisational representatives of their new ventures, in which case the individual-level IM endeavours made by entrepreneurs exert an impact on key stakeholders (Benson et al., 2015; Yusuf, 2011; Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014; Tang, Khan, & Zhu, 2012). This often occurs when new ventures strive to gain legitimacy in the following occasions. Firstly, entrepreneurs acquire resources that are pivotal to their initial survival (e.g. Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014). Secondly, entrepreneurs rationalise their potentially suspect conducts in response to external scrutiny (e.g. Benson et al., 2015). Finally, entrepreneurs tend to moderate self-views following venture failure (e.g. Shepherd & Haynie, 2011). Nevertheless, in this case entrepreneurs mainly enact IM in face-to-face interactions (e.g. entrepreneurs present their business ideas to potential investors, see Yusuf, 2011 and Nagy et al., 2012 for details) and therefore it inevitably involves IM strategies at the individual level (e.g. an entrepreneur's personal charisma, see Yusuf, 2011 for details). In other words, how entrepreneurs are perceived in the eyes of their companies' key audiences exerts an impact on how the new ventures they represent are perceived by the same audiences. Since individual-level IM enacted by entrepreneurs is not entirely centred upon SMEs as a whole, it is regarded as individual-level IM in organisational settings (Bolino et al., 2008). Also, individual-level IM in organisational settings is

often directed at investors who are expected to help launch the new venture, rather than audiences (e.g. customers and programme participants) who are supposed to sustain the development of the company. Thus, OIM practised by SMEs as a collective is understudied. Overall, SMEs are likely to shape impressions in ways that largely differ from those prevalent in large firms and it is imperative to understand how OIM is practised in the context of SMEs.

### **1.2.3 Social Media**

It is evident that the research scope of OIM is constantly expanding (Bolino et al., 2008). Preceding OIM literature often concentrates on organisational communications such as annual reports (e.g. Elsbach & Sutton, 1998) and spokespersons' statements (e.g. Elsbach & Sutton, 1992), which are deemed pivotal to an organization's business performance (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Whilst the emergence of various internet-based media outlets, namely, social media (e.g. Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014; Benthaus, Risius, & Beck, 2016), has revolutionized the way organizations manage relations, and perceptions of key audiences. Here, social media is defined as a variety of Web-based media platforms which promote highly interactive user-initiated communications (i.e. two-way communications) (Mayfield, 2008; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Cook, 2008; Abraham, 2012; Li & Shiu, 2012). Some of the most extensively popular forms of social media are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube (Kemp, 2015). Since social media has triggered revolutionary ways of interacting, participating, and collaborating (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Li & Shiu, 2012; Benthaus, Risius, & Beck, 2016), the past decade has witnessed a rapid growth of its usage for communication, networking, and information access (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). According to Kemp (2015), there were approximately 2.078 billion active social media user accounts

worldwide in 2014 which accounted for 29% of the total population. Users of such a considerable number spent on average 2.4 hours on social media on a daily basis (Kemp, 2015). Given its continuously growing popularity, there is also a growing number of scholarly endeavours inquiring social media's role in boosting communications between organisations and their stakeholders (e.g. Stelzner, 2012; Hoehle, Scornavacca, & Huff, 2012; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Young, 2010). According to these studies, social media has been considered as a renowned platform for organisational communications due to its ability to 1) disseminate a large volume of information to diversified populations (Li & Shiu, 2012), facilitating a word-of-mouth effect among audiences (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010); and 2) empower organisations to collect and analyse information regarding their target audiences for further improvements of their products/services (Larson & Watson, 2011).

It is evident that social media has been a common practice of SMEs (Chen et al., 2008; Ainin et al., 2015; Atanassova & Clark, 2015). Social media adoption is anchored in a variety of organizational objectives including communication (Lee & Kozar, 2012), market research and branding (Congxi et al., 2010), innovation (Chesbrough, Vanhaverbeke, & West, 2006; Wamba & Carter, 2014), advertising via social networks (Beloff and Pandya, 2010; Handayani and Lisdianingrum, 2012), driving cultural change (Bhanot, 2012), organizational learning (Hamburg, 2012), knowledge sharing (Razmerita & Kirchner, 2011; Panahi, Watson, & Partridge, 2012), and managing customer relations (Harrigan, 2013; Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014; Harrigan & Miles, 2014). Among these objectives, social media has been most frequently implemented as a key mechanism to proactively interact with target audiences and upgrade communications and collaborations (Meske & Stieglitz, 2013). According to McCann & Barlow (2015), SMEs' social media adoption is prevalently driven by their

intent to 1) increase publicity, 2) consolidate relationships with audiences online, 3) expand follower base, and ultimately 4) enhance business performance. More intriguingly, SMEs' social media usage is also motivated by both their curiosity and ignorance regarding social media (McCann & Barlow, 2015). Further, since social media requires no complex skills or high cost (Barnes et al., 2012) and facilitates customised responses (Hinchcliffe, 2010; Sparks, So, & Bradley, 2016) and feedback of a large volume (Day, 2013), SMEs, as ascertained by many, have benefited from their social media implementations, since such a useful technique may fundamentally influence their business operations (Barnes et al., 2012; Nakara, Benmoussa, & Jaouen, 2012; Atansassova & Clark, 2015; Öztamur & Karakadılar, 2014; Stokes & Nelson, 2013).

Nonetheless, the growing social media adoption in SMEs also suffers an ambiguity surrounding how to properly gauge social media impact, resource requirements, and managerial procedures (Stokes & Nelson, 2013). This is mainly due to SMEs' lack of relevant expertise and knowhow to properly strategize social media management (McCann & Barlow, 2015; Nakara et al., 2012; Zeiller & Schauer, 2011; Harris, Rae, & Misner, 2012; Packham et al., 2005). Moreover, SMEs are also confronted with challenges especially in terms of the screening, sense-making, and reprocessing of information collected from social media (Larson & Watson, 2011; Chen, Chiang, & Storey, 2012; Harrigan, 2013). To be specific, social media provides diverse formats of information (e.g. statistics, texts, emoticons, pictures, flash animations, and videos) and it requires certain framework to 'decode' what underlies the meaning of the information (Larson & Watson, 2011; Storey & Greene, 2010). However, SMEs usually suffer the inadequacy of professional analysts (Storey & Greene, 2010) and uniform measurement for analysing the information collected (Nakara et al., 2012;

McCann & Barlow, 2015). As a consequence, it becomes imperative to understand how to optimize social media adoption in the context of SMEs, taking into account the distinctive characteristics of SMEs that sharply differentiate them from large firms.

Although companies are constantly using social media as a way to establish, sustain, and justify their images in the eyes of key stakeholders (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013), there is still a dearth of studies exploring social media's influence on OIM enactment. The existing literature indicates that the functionality of social media has sparked the formulation of new OIM strategies that could rarely be observed in interpersonal interactions (e.g. Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014). For instance, it was discovered that corporate representatives (e.g. customer service) adopted an OIM strategy named 'diversion' in response to persistent critics, with the purpose of avoiding further attention to the issues that might damage the company's image (Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014). This strategy was underpinned by the algorithm of Facebook and hence was unlikely to be executed in interpersonal interactions. Further, organisations no longer have control on how others view them on social media (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011; Wang et al., 2011; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). According to warranting theory (Walther & Parks, 2002), social media users' comments on corporate social media homepages seem to represent a warrant that is spontaneously initiated and not tightly controllable (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013). For instance, complimentary comments provided by customers are likely to steer public impressions positively whereas critical comments are prone to provoking negative perceptions of others. In this regard, social media has made organizations vulnerable to those explicit and instant criticisms and hence they may attempt to retain the control by exercising more active OIM (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011; Veil, Sellnow, & Petrun,

2012). In other words, social media might trigger new OIM strategies that retain more control over the publicized image. To sum up, it is indicated that new OIM strategies or new ways of using existing strategies can be developed to embark on the features of social media (i.e. social media as the platform where companies and their audiences interact), which differ from organisational communications in offline situations.

### **1.3 Research Aim and Questions**

The overall research aim of this study is to explore how OIM is practiced by SMEs on social media. Three research questions have been established to achieve this aim. Firstly, organisational impressions/images are a relatively underplayed construct as most scholarly attention has been paid to OIM strategies. For instance, although they are recognised as the motives for OIM strategies (Jones & Pittman, 1985; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016), Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo's (1999) taxonomy of OIM strategies directly extrapolated the images/impressions from the one developed within interpersonal settings by Jones & Pittman (1982), without addressing the disparity between how organisations and people prefer to be perceived by others. In a similar vein, recent studies (e.g. Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Benthous, Risius, & Beck, 2016; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016) have not provided any detailed reflection on how organisational images/impressions adapt to their research settings. Not even a nuance was notified in these studies. Given the fundamental discrepancies between SMEs and large firms elaborated above, it is reasonable to assume that SMEs are likely to shape different types of organisational images/impressions. Thus, the first research question is set out to grasp how SMEs desire to be perceived online. Further, as discussed above, new OIM strategies or new ways of using existing strategies have been developed to accommodate different organisational contexts (e.g. Bansal &



Kistruck, 2006; Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015; Graffin, Halebian, & Kiley, 2016). Thus, the second research question is intended to explore OIM strategies that are specific to the research context of this study. Finally, since organisational images/impressions and OIM strategies are likely to be moderated to cater to the research settings of this study, it is pivotal to discern what substantial aspects of the specified research settings have influenced the overall OIM practice. Therefore, the third research question is designed to reflect such an inquiry. Overall, these three interrelated research questions have been listed as follows:

**RQ1:** How do SMEs desire to be perceived online (i.e. what are SMEs' desired organisational impressions/images online)?

**RQ2:** In order to shape the desired impressions/images online, what OIM strategies do SMEs employ on social media?

**RQ3:** What organisational qualities have affected SMEs' OIM practice on social media?

#### **1.4 Methodology**

Given the intrinsic social nature of OIM practice, and the lack of understanding of this phenomenon, an exploratory, inductive approach is adopted for this research. While theoretical foundations rooted in the OIM, SME, and social media literature provide pillars for framing the research questions, it is imperative to underpin the existing knowledge with a qualitative, inductive inquiry. Therefore, this study, with a constructivist paradigm, adopts a qualitative multiple-case study approach that features data collected from three different sources: 1) firm manifestos; 2) social media postings; and 3) key informant interviews, and analysed through thematic analysis. It is worth highlighting that such data collection approach has been designed to address

Bolino et al.' (2008: p. 1098) calls for studies collecting data from different sources or levels to draw comprehensive insights with regard to how organisations adopt OIM to '*strategically position themselves in the eyes of their stakeholders*'. A total of 8 cases were selected as the research subjects and they were SMEs 1) in the creative industries; 2) located in Northwest England, 3) with regular social media presence; and 4) which agree to give informed consent for interviews. Data collection process is threefold. Firstly, a manifesto, which is defined as a firm's self-reflection on its goal, mission, vision, value, history, and work theme, was collected from each firm's official website, in order to explore how SMEs desired to be perceived online (i.e. **RQ1**). Secondly, social media postings were collected from each firm's social media accounts, with the intent of discerning what OIM strategies SMEs employed on social media (i.e. **RQ2**). Finally, a semi-structured interview was conducted with each firm's social media practitioner to gain an understanding of what organisational qualities affected SMEs' OIM practice on social media (i.e. **RQ3**). A thematic analysis, drawing upon Kempster & Cope (2010) and Braun & Clarke (2006), was conducted to interpret each dataset, without subscribing to any priori hypotheses or preconceived preferences. Overall, the six-stage fieldwork summarising how the methodology was carried out is outlined below:

- 1) **Sampling**: screening SMEs and monitoring their social media activities to select cases;
- 2) **Phase 1**: collecting data from firm manifestos and analysing the collected data in order to identify SMEs' desired organisational images/impressions online (i.e. **RQ1**);

3) **Phase 2:** collecting data from social media postings and analysing the collected data in order to develop a taxonomy of OIM strategies employed by SMEs on social media (i.e. **RQ2**);

4) **Phase 3:** collecting data from key informant interviews and analysing the collected data in order to identify the organisational qualities affecting SMEs' OIM practice on social media (i.e. **RQ3**);

5) **Presenting the findings;** and

6) **Revisiting prior literature:** weaving back and forth between literature and findings and discussing how the findings of this study, which are specific to the specified settings, contributes to the existing body of knowledge.

## **1.5 Research Contributions**

The findings of this study address a number of research gaps that pertain to three bodies of knowledge: OIM, SMEs, and organisational communication mediated by social media, eventually leading to the following theoretical and practical contributions.

### **1.5.1 Theoretical Contributions**

This study firstly has extended the existing literature by identify organisational impressions and a taxonomy of OIM strategies that are specific to SMEs on social media. Secondly, this study offers novel evidence to advance Goffman's (1959) propositions with regard to 1) 'team performance', 'frontstage and backstage analogy', and 'social cues in mediated communications', by ascertaining respectively 1) the positive influence of individuality on the overall team performance in perpetuating organisational images/impressions (i.e. self-initiated monitoring behaviours); 2) the positive influence of redefining the boundary between 'frontstage' and 'backstage'

(i.e. BTS content); and 3) the functionality of social media analytics to replace conventional social cues in mediated communications, all of which have rarely been addressed in prior literature. Further, this study answers Sandberg & Holmlund's (2015) call for more in-depth case studies to understand the use of OIM strategies in organisational communications and responds to Benthaus, Risius, & Beck's (2016) recommendation by drawing implications of how OIM can be integrated with social media activities. Finally, this study provides a methodological design, featuring one dataset exclusively responsible for answering one specific research question, which could be replicated by future research to explore OIM practice in an alternative context.

### **1.5.2 Practical Contributions**

Since its findings can nurture the OIM mentality of SMEs' social media practitioners and offer a viable guidance for SMEs to understand and refine their OIM performance on social media, coupled with the fact that effective OIM practice improves a firm's financial performance (e.g. Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013), the present study is of great practical value to SMEs.

### **1.6 Outline of Chapters**

This thesis is organised in ten chapters. *Chapter 2* mainly discusses prior studies pertaining to OIM. This chapter firstly addresses the definition and key propositions of OIM (e.g. Goffman, 1959) that are widely employed in recent publications. Secondly, it outlines how OIM has evolved over time (e.g. individual level to organisational level). Further, it elaborates on how OIM is strategized in the existing literature (e.g. the taxonomy developed by Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). In addition, this chapter also features a section discussing how organisational impression/image differs from similar constructs (i.e. organisational reputation and

organisational identity), seeking to rationalise why organisational impression/image was chosen as the main theory of this study.

**Chapter 3** focuses on literature regarding SMEs and social media. It primarily addresses 1) how SME is defined (related to the criteria for case selection) and significance of SMEs to the collective society (i.e. economy and well-being of the society); 2) characteristics of SMEs that differentiate them from large firms; 3) how OIM is integrated with SMEs/entrepreneurship in prior literature; 4) how social media is defined (related to the criteria for case selection) and its significance as a communication tool between organisations and audiences; 5) how social media is adopted in SMEs; and 6) how social media is integrated with OIM in prior literature.

**Chapter 4** features a detailed discussion on the research methodology of this thesis. This chapter is mainly threefold. The first section, based on the research gaps identified in the literature review, specifies the overall research aim, and corresponding research questions that serve to guide the whole methodology. The second section explains and validates constructivism – the paradigmatic assumptions – with which the multiple-case study approach adopted in this study was carried out. Finally, the third section respectively justifies and elaborates the specific methodological design, consisting of sampling, data collection, and data analysis.

In **Chapter 5**, the findings of the analysis of firm manifestos, which aims to answer **RQ1**, are presented. The analysis identifies four major organisational impressions: ‘professionalism’, ‘social responsibility’, ‘attractiveness’, and ‘creativity’. This chapter is organised by firstly introducing how the themes were synthesised and secondly defining, explaining, and exemplifying each major theme and corresponding sub-themes.

*Chapter 6* presents the findings of the analysis of social media postings, with the purpose of answering **RQ2**. The analysis yields two main sets of OIM strategies: qualification-oriented and relationship-oriented strategies. It is structured by firstly addressing how the two main sets of OIM strategies have been identified from the examined social media postings (i.e. the storyline regarding how the two overarching themes and their corresponding sub-themes were synthesised from the data). Secondly, these two sets of OIM strategies are defined, interpreted and exemplified (i.e. presentation of the results with examples and direct quotations where necessary).

*Chapter 7* presents the findings of the analysis of interviews. In order to answer **RQ 3**, the outcome of this analysis features seven organisational qualities including division of roles and responsibilities, work routine, work principle, evaluation system, nature of industry, nature of practitioner, and functionality of social media in sample firms' OIM enactment on social media. Firstly, an extended description of each selected case is provided so that the readers can resonate with the succeeding findings. Secondly, a discussion on how the seven organisational qualities were synthesized is offered to illuminate how the interview data was interpreted. Finally, the identified qualities are defined, interpreted and empirically exemplified.

*Chapter 8* offers an exhaustive discussion of the findings with reference to prior literature. It substantiates the insights of the current study as to how the findings driven by each research question extend the extant knowledge in OIM studies. Accordingly, plausible justifications for the association between the findings and extant theories are also provided. This chapter is structured by firstly summarising the key findings of the present study (as a warm-up to remind the readers of what has been presented in *Chapter 5, 6, and 7*). The second section elaborates on how the findings contribute to the current OIM literature. These findings are based on the three

interrelated research questions that were established to explore: 1) organisational impressions projected by SMEs online (**RQ1**); 2) OIM strategies implemented by SMEs on social media (**RQ2**); and 3) organisational qualities affecting SMEs' OIM practice on social media (**RQ3**). Finally, broader implications for the inquired phenomenon are discussed, drawing upon the triangulation between the findings based on secondary data (i.e. *Chapter 5 & 6*), and the findings based on primary data (i.e. *Chapter 7*).

In *Chapter 9* (Conclusion), the key findings of this study are revisited alongside the research contributions, limitations, and implications for future research. Thus, this chapter is structured by firstly summarising this study's research context, methodological design, and main findings. Secondly, both theoretical and practical contributions of this study are elaborated. Finally, limitations are detailed and viable directions for future research are illuminated.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW (OIM)**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The past decades have witnessed escalating interest in phenomena of Impression Management (IM) exhibited from both within, and by, organizations (Mohamed & Gardner, 2004; Bolino et al., 2008; Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014; Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Benthous, Risius, & Beck, 2016; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016). IM, in a generic sense, represents manipulation of information and/or regulation of behaviours intended to frame one's image perceived by others (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Bolino et al., 2008; Benthous, Disius, & Beck, 2016; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Tedeschi & Riess, 1981; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997).

In general, prior research has exhibited three trends in its investigations of IM behaviours. Firstly, the majority of studies have put under microscope the IM at the individual level. Primary contexts in this research realm include interviews (e.g. McFarland, Ryan, & Kriska, 2003), performance appraisal (e.g. Harris et al., 2007), and career success (e.g. Wayne et al., 1997), all of which illuminate the contribution of IM to individuals' establishment, maintenance, protection, and adjustment of how they are perceived in the organization. Secondly, some organisational phenomena have been delved from an IM perspective (i.e. individual-level IM in organizational settings). Such phenomena include feedback seeking (e.g. Morrison & Bies, 1991), leadership management (e.g. Greenberg, 1990), and organizational citizenship (e.g. Yun, Takeuchi, & Liu, 2007). In the research scope, IM has been employed to help interpret the occurrence of workplace phenomena (Bolino et al., 2008).



While the above two concentrate on individual behaviours, scholars have applied IM theory to organizational settings. Studies in this area suggest that IM enables organizations to shape their own images in the eyes of diverse constituencies (Bolino et al., 2008; Ginzel, Kramer, & Sutton, 1993; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). Nevertheless, research at this level has attracted far less scholarly attention than individual-level research. Research conducted from an organizational perspective are outperformed by that at the individual level in both volume and quality (Bolino et al., 2008). Consequently, it becomes imperative to further develop the concept of IM at the organisational level.

This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive review of organizational impression management (OIM) as a construct on which the present study is centred. The first section of this chapter focuses on the foundation and development of OIM. In the following section, an exhaustive evaluation of prevailing OIM strategies is offered, alongside an in-depth discussion of prior research in relation to real-world applications of those strategies. This chapter is concluded by presenting the strengths and deficiencies of existing OIM literature.

## **2.2 Foundation and Development of OIM**

This section aims to lay the foundation for the investigation of OIM. It is structured by 1) providing a detailed assessment of various definitions of IM/OIM identified in existing literature and justifying why the particular definition is privileged as the guideline for the literature exploration, 2) emphasizing what role audience plays in OIM process, and 3) synthesizing how the construct of OIM has developed over time and what can be extrapolated from its development.

### 2.2.1 Definitions of OIM

Prior OIM literature embodies a variety of definitions of IM/OIM in an attempt to capture the essence of the studied construct with organizational settings. *Table 1* reveals diverse definitions that have been employed by studies within the research realm. Before proceeding with the discussion over the definitive plurality of OIM, it becomes imperative to introduce the antecedent of IM that first articulated all the integral constituents of the studied construct. The concept of IM is rooted in Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model of social interaction in which individuals are metaphorically portrayed as 'actors' delivering crafted 'performances' in front of 'audiences' (Rettie, 2009; Solomon et al., 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). These 'actors' strive to exert control over the images purposively projected to targeted others in order to obtain favourable social, psychological, or material end-states (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Rettie, 2009). Consequently, it can be synthesized that individuals, driven by certain motives, deliberately seek to harness impressions towards themselves when entering the presence of others (Goffman, 1959). Given the terminology embedded in the metaphor the author adopted, it is notable that 'actor', 'audience', and 'performance' are at the centre of his endeavour in conceptualizing the phenomenon prevalent in social interactions. Also, it is worth highlighting that 'performance' is carefully tailored before being delivered to a target audience (Goffman, 1959), implying the actor's conscious intention to shape perceptions others form of him/her. Finally, the ultimate goal of such 'performance' is to optimize the perceptions of relevant others and hence 'perception' is reasonably crucial to this phenomenon.

**Table 1: Definitions of IM**

| Stance                | Topic of Research   | Scope of Research  | Definition of IM  | Existing papers (in organizational settings) citing the definition  |
|-----------------------|---|--|---|---|
| Individual Stance     | (Schlenker, 1980: P. 6)   | Self-concept<br>Social identity<br>Interpersonal relationship<br>Social psychology                                   | <i>'The conscious or unconscious attempt to control images that are projected in real or imagined social interactions'</i>  | e.g. (Arndt & Bigelow, 2000); (Elsbach, 2003); (Carter, 2006); (Leiringer & Cardellino, 2008)   |
|                       | (Schneider, 1981: p. 25)  | Self-presentation<br>Impression management<br>Social psychology  | <i>'An attempt by one person (actor) to affect the perceptions of her or him by another (target)'</i>   | e.g. (Arndt & Bigelow, 2000); (Leiringer & Cardellino, 2008)  |
|                       | (Tedeschi & Riess, 1981: p. 3)  | Social identity<br>Impression management   | <i>'Any behaviour by a person that has the purpose of controlling or manipulating the attributions and impressions formed of that person by others'</i>   | e.g. (Arndt & Bigelow, 2000); (Leiringer & Cardellino, 2008)  |
|                       | (Leary & Kowalski, 1990: p. 34)   | Interpersonal behaviour<br>Social image  | <i>'The process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions others form of them'</i>  | e.g. (Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014);   |
|                       | (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992: p. 137)<br>Adapted from (Schlenker & Weigold, 1989) | Interpersonal behaviour  | <i>'Packaging information in ways designed to lead audiences to a particular conclusion'</i>  | e.g. (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999); (Arndt & Bigelow, 2000)  |
| Organizational Stance | (Elsbach, Sutton, & Principe, 1998: P. 68)                                      | Organizational impression management<br>Symbolic management<br>Social influence<br>Routine service encounters        | <i>'Any action that is purposefully designed and carried out to influence an audience's perceptions of the organization'</i>  | e.g. (Bolino et al., 2008); (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013); (Tyler et al., 2012); (Spear & Roper, 2013); (Van Halderen et al., 2016) |
|                       | (Elsbach, 2003: P. 298)   | Organizational perception management<br>Organizational image<br>Organizational identity<br>Organizational reputation | <i>'Actions that are designed and carried out by organizational spokespersons to influence audiences' perceptions of the organization'</i>  | e.g. (Carberry & King, 2012)  |
|                       | (Bansal & Kistruck, 2006: p. 166)   | Organizational impression management<br>Organizational legitimacy  | <i>'Impressions are the Symbolic representations of these substantive actions*<sup>1</sup>. Impression management, then, is the shaping of those representations in order to influence stakeholder perceptions, by controlling what is disclosed and how'</i> | e.g. (Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015)  |

\*<sup>1</sup>'Substantive actions' refer to the ones that elicit 'real and material change in the organization's goals, structures, and processes' (Bansal & Kistruck, 2006: P. 166).

Overall, the successive OIM studies have showcased, holistically or partially, the meaning of the above constituents in their attempts to unpack the construct. In other

words, Goffman's (1959) conceptualisation of IM has been extensively employed as the theoretical foundation by many recent publications as revealed in *Table 2*:

**Table 2: Recent Publications building on Goffman's (1959) Conceptualisation of IM (Antecedent of OIM)**

| Area                                  | Author/s                                   | Conceptual/Empirical | Role of OIM  | Role of Goffman's (1959) work  |
|---------------------------------------|--|----------------------|--|--|
| Financial Performance                 | Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans (2013) | Empirical            | Investigate how OIM on social media impacts an organisation's financial performance                | Used as groundwork for theoretical framing   |
| Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) | Tata & Prasad (2015)                       | Conceptual           | Used as theoretical foundation to develop a conceptual model of CSR communications                 | used to frame the formulation of conceptual model  |
| Conceptual Framework of OIM           | Merkle-Davies & Brennan (2011)             | Conceptual           | Develop a theoretical framework of OIM building upon concepts of rationality and motivation        | Used to link up OIM with concepts of rationality and motivation from a social psychology perspective |
|                                       | Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris (2016)    | Empirical            | Develop a conceptual model of OIM based on theories regarding reputation, and cognitive dissonance | Used as groundwork for theoretical framing   |
| Corporate Communication               | Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland (2016)     | Empirical            | Used to discern triggers of improper social media posts  | Used as theoretical framework  |
|                                       | Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen (2014)       | Empirical            | Used to interpret customer-company interactions  | Used as groundwork for theoretical framing   |
|                                       | Bullock (2018)                             | Empirical            | Used to explain how police officers construct presentational strategies on social media            | Used as theoretical framework  |
|                                       | Zaharopoulos & Kwok (2017)                 | Empirical            | Explore how law firms use OIM strategies on social media   | Used as theoretical foundation   |
| Corporate Reporting                   | Solomon et al. (2013)                      | Empirical            | Used to interpret the creation and dissemination of social and environmental accountability        | Used as theoretical framework  |
| Corporate Reputation                  | Benthaus (2014)                            | Empirical            | Investigate how OIM contributes to corporate reputation of financial institutions on social media  | Used to underpin OIM theories  |
|                                       | Benthaus, Risius, & Beck (2016)            | Empirical            | Investigate how OIM exerts an impact on public perceptions among social media users                | Used to underpin OIM theories  |

In order to best serve the interest of the present study, OIM is defined as '*any action that is purposefully designed and carried out to influence an audience's perceptions of the organization*' (Elsbach, Sutton, & Principe, 1998: P. 68). Reasons are given as follows. Firstly, this definition embodies all the key elements deriving from

Goffman's (1959) proposition. In specific, the presence of each key element can be found in the rhetoric of this definition. For example, apart from 'audience' and 'perception' that are directly mentioned, 'organization' in this case replaces 'individual' as the 'actor' to perform OIM. Also, 'action' is undoubtedly an equivalent to 'performance'. More importantly, 'purposefully' hints the intentionality of OIM. Further, the authors also emphasise the significance of 'organizational image' in OIM process as it is '*the character and demeanour organizations attempt to project to their audiences*' (Elsbach, Sutton, & Principe, 1988: p.68). In contrast, some of the alternatives displayed in **Table 1** fail to precisely convey what all the key constituents represent. For example, Elsbach's (2003) definition (see **Table 1**) restricts the notion of 'actor' to 'organizational spokesperson'. Although this 'organizational spokesperson' is defined as '*anyone who is perceived by audience members as representing the organization*' (Elsbach, 2003: p. 318), it still fails to clarify whether some widely employed entities are legitimate organizational representatives. These entities, such as corporate stories (e.g. Spear & Roper, 2013), social media (e.g. Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014), and statements regarding biodiversity (e.g. Boiral, 2016), do not fit the apparent description but are capable of making OIM efforts in different organizational contexts.

Secondly, this definition takes an organizational stance as it explicitly specifies that 'actor' exclusively refers to 'organization' in OIM. Judging by the rhetoric of them, most of the definitions shown in **Table 1** are individual-oriented. It is important to differentiate the definition employed in the present study, in which organizations are the entities to initiate OIM efforts, from its counterparts depicting IM that occurs between individuals or between different groups of individuals within an organization.

Finally, this definition has been widely referenced by many up-to-date empirical studies within the specified research realm to fuel their theoretical argumentation (e.g. Bolino et al., 2008; Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Tyler et al., 2012; Spear & Roper, 2013; Van Halderen et al., 2016).

There are two indispensable notions introduced by Goffman (1959), namely, ‘team performance’ and ‘frontstage and backstage analogy’, which can be used to deepen the understanding of OIM (Rettie, 2009; Hunter-McDonnell & King, 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). Firstly, the notion of ‘team performance’ sheds light on how teams on behalf of their organisations cooperate in perpetuating desired organisational impressions (Goffman, 1959; Hunter-McDonnell & King, 2013). In other words, the projection of a particular impression heavily depends on the collaboration of all the members of a team representing an organisation (Goffman, 1959; Hunter-McDonnell & King, 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). It is noteworthy that such collaboration can be obscured in situations where certain members of a team, although they are assigned with different duties, unconsciously breach the shared conventions (Westphal et al., 2012). The obscured collaboration can potentially damage the overall impression being fostered through the shared conventions (Westphal et al., 2012; Hunter-McDonnell & King, 2013). In such situations, team members may resort to certain mechanisms with the purpose of restoring the breached conventions (Peng & Tjosvold, 2011; Westphal et al., 2012; Vaast & Kaganer, 2013). Noticeably, this can be materialised, from an OIM perspective, by demarcating the spaces in which public and private interactions occur (Goffman, 1959; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016) and such demarcation of spaces refers to the separation between ‘frontage’ and ‘backstage’, which will be explained next.

Another proposition articulated by Goffman (1959) to help explain how OIM is constructed and performed in organisational communications is ‘frontstage and backstage analogy’ (Solomon et al., 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Benthous, Risius, & Beck, 2016; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016). In the analogy, with the aim of controlling what could be viewed by the general public, teams representing their organisations are inclined to split their environment into two areas, namely, ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ (Goffman, 1959; Solomon et al., 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). Here, the appearance of the frontstage area, coupled with the behaviours of the team members, is deliberated in the backstage area before being exposed to public view (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1990; Raghuram, 2013). Since what could be viewed in frontstage area contributes to the overall impression being conveyed, teams are probably accustomed to rehearsing multiple anticipated scenarios (Goffman, 1959; Raghuram, 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). In doing so, a premeditated ‘script’ can be devised to regulate the organisations’ performance at frontage in order to cater to different types of audiences (Vieira de Cuhna, 2013; Raghuram, 2013). Anything that potentially denies the premeditated script is concealed from public view in the backstage area, where crafted performance (i.e. appearance and behaviour) is more spontaneous and less contrived since the teams are not being scrutinised, thereby inflicting no damage to the projected organisational impressions (Goffman, 1959; Vieira de Cuhna, 2013; Raghuram, 2013; Solomon et al., 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016).

### **2.2.2 The Role of Audience**

OIM is a dyadic construct that emphasizes not only the organizations as the actors to exhibit OIM-oriented behaviours, but also the stakeholders as the audiences that offer perceptions towards and responses to those behaviours. Audience here refers to both

internal and external stakeholders who are crucial to organizations' survival, effectiveness and profitability such as customers, board members, and employees (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). It is stressed that the alleged 'performance' of an actor is dictated by the characteristics of both the situations and audiences (Goffman, 1959). During the OIM process, audiences act in ways that help forge and renew an organization's image (Ginzel, Kramer, & Sutton, 1993). Audiences' reactions to an organization's OIM efforts can elicit further OIM efforts customized in conformity with their interests and hence engender a reciprocal cycle in which the organization's image is constantly negotiated between the organization and its targeted audiences (Ginzel, Kramer, & Sutton, 1993). This OIM cycle, in which the feedback of audiences is highly valued, contributes to the iterative construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of organizational image (Coupland & Brown, 2004).

To further illustrate the point, a small number of papers which have empirically investigated the role organizational audiences play in shaping the OIM process were identified (e.g. Ginzel, Kramer, & Sutton, 1993; Rindova & Fombrun, 1999; Carter, 2006; Bozzolan, Cho, & Michelon, 2013). Firstly, Ginzel, Kramer, & Sutton (1993: p. 227) conceptualised a multistage framework characterizing the principal constituents and phases of the reciprocally impactful OIM process that entailed '*cycles of negotiation between top management and segments of the organization's audience*'. To be precise, this conceptual framework consists of three phases among which the very first is that top management representatives, driven by the need of enhancing or defending the organizational image, seek to establish a desirable impression (Ginzel, Kramer, & Sutton, 1993). The second phase features the responses provided by key stakeholders to the established impression (Ginzel, Kramer, & Sutton, 1993). The stakeholders' responses vary from full compliance to complete rejection and most



commonly they tend to question its sufficiency and demand further exposition or clarification (Ginzel, Kramer, & Sutton, 1993). In the final phase, top management representatives, taking feedbacks into account, are involved in the cycles of negotiation in an attempt to bridge the gap between the way stakeholders perceive the organization and the way the organization itself prefers to be perceived (Ginzel, Kramer, & Sutton, 1993). As is explicitly stated, this paper demonstrates how stakeholders' opinions exert an impact on the decision-making embedded in the OIM process. More importantly, it implicitly introduces a previously unvalued notion that the organizational image-shaping behaviours escalated by OIM strategies might entail a repetitive process of interaction with key stakeholders. In other words, the managerial system dictating this interactive OIM process should allow for sufficient dynamism and mobility. In a later study, Rindova & Fombrun (1999) also underpinned the role of stakeholders in sustaining a firm's competitive advantage. Synthesizing both cognitive and economic viewpoints, the authors suggested that a firm's competitive advantage was grounded upon the collaboration of the firm and its constituents. Such collaboration entailed a projection of image intended to shape the perceptions of relevant corporate stakeholders (Rindova & Fombrun, 1999). However, it was never a unidirectional interaction, given that during the interaction, those key stakeholders, rather than being merely information receivers, either showed compliance, or voiced discontent and requested alteration regarding the image projected onto them. As a result, OIM strategies a firm used in the whole process were constantly adjusted in accordance with prior and ongoing interactions with the stakeholders (Rindova & Fombrun, 1999). In addition, Carter (2006), using IM theories from an upper-echelons perspective, discerned how a firm's OIM efforts were unevenly distributed to different groups of stakeholders. It is indicated that OIM

activities were intensified for the most visible stakeholder groups whereas they were decreased towards comparatively less visible groups (Carter, 2006). Finally, Bozzolan, Cho & Michelon (2013) targeted a particular company ‘FIAT Group’ in an attempt to investigate how OIM was involved in the interplay between the company and three of its key organizational audiences, namely, the local press, the international press, and the financial analysts. Having analysed news articles and analyst reports published during a six-year period (2004-2009), the researchers argued that the organization assessed was inclined to strategically craft and customize its OIM so as to approach different types of audiences (Bozzolan, Cho & Michelon, 2013). Also, Evidence was gathered to support that the salience of stakeholders dictated the intensity of OIM usage in the daily course of business (without occurrence of particular controversies) (Bozzolan, Cho & Michelon, 2013). Judging by the nature of case study, the findings yielded were intrinsically unable to safeguard the generalisability in an alternative context. Therefore, future research is required to test whether the findings will remain consistent over time and with a different setting.

### **2.2.3 Organizational Image, Reputation, and Identity**

This section compares and contrasts organizational image, reputation, and identity – three key forms of organizational perception that have been widely interpreted in OIM literature. By differentiating these three types of organizational outcome, the basics of this study’s research scope will be defined.

Organizational images refer to ‘*relatively current, and temporary perceptions of an organization, held by internal or external audiences, regarding an organization’s fit with particular distinctiveness categories*’ (Elsbach, 2003: p. 300). Organizational images, as shown in **Table 3**, display several features: 1) comparatively temporal; 2) specific; and 3) coexistent. In specifics, compared with the other two perceptions,

organizational images are less enduring (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Hatch & Schultz, 2000). Also, organizational images can be perceived from both inside and outside the organization (Hatch & Schultz, 2000; Mayer et al., 1995). For instance, organizational images are commonly viewed by external stakeholders as substantive attributions of an organization (Fombrun, 1996; Sutton & Callahan, 1987), whereas speculations of internal members of an organization on how the organization is perceived by outsiders are regarded as ‘*construed external images*’ (Elsbach, 2003: p. 301) and such images are clearly constructed by insiders (Fombrun, 1996; Sutton & Callahan, 1987). Further, several organizational images can be projected by an organization simultaneously since different organizational attributions are inclined to elicit diversified images. For instance, firms with valuable organizational achievements exhibited on their official websites may most likely be perceived as highly ‘competent’, whilst firms promoting their commitments to local communities are probably recognized as ‘morally worthy’.

***Table 3: Comparing Organizational Images, Reputations, and Identities***

|                                      | <b>Organizational Image</b>   | <b>Organizational Reputation</b>   | <b>Organizational Identity</b>  |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Primary perceivers                   | Insiders and outsiders  | Outsiders  | Insiders  |
| Defining categorizations             | Distinctiveness   | Status   | Distinctiveness and status  |
| Typical endurance                    | Short-lived   | Long-lived   | Long-lived  |
| Specificity                          | Specific  | General  | General and specific  |
| Common impression management context | Organizational crises: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industrial accidents</li> <li>• Product recall</li> </ul> | Organizational competition: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performance reports</li> <li>• Quality ranking</li> </ul> | Organizational change: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership change</li> <li>• Membership change</li> </ul> |

*Source: Elsbach (2003)*

It is worth highlighting that the most extensively researched form of organizational image is organizational legitimacy (Elsbach, 2001; Elsbach, 2003). One plausible definition of organizational legitimacy is ‘*a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions*’ (Suchman, 1995, p. 574).

According to Suchman (1995), legitimacy with organizational settings is a multi-faceted construct that embodies personal legitimacy (e.g. founders), organizational legitimacy (e.g. structural characteristics of a company), and relational legitimacy (e.g. partners). Among these facets, organizational legitimacy has been richly documented as the drive for organizations to exercise defensive OIM strategies in response to disputable conducts (e.g. Desai, 2014). In this respect, Firms' organizational legitimacy, which is widely portrayed in the existing literature, materializes with the main purpose to solicit support from valued stakeholders whose opinions are influential over firms' survival and prospect (Suchman, 1995; Elsbach, 2003).

Organizational reputations are defined as '*enduring status categorizations of an organization (relative to other organizations) as perceived by external audiences and stakeholders*' (Elsbach, 2003: p. 304). As this definition implies, the features of organizational reputation that intrinsically differentiates it from organizational image can be anchored in three main aspects. Firstly, reputation signals an '*overall estimation in which a firm is held by its constituents*' (Fombrun, 1996: p. 37), whereas image reflects '*a set of specific associations*' (Cowden & Sellnow, 2002: p. 199). Thus, reputation is more generic in nature than is image. Secondly, reputation is mainly construed by status, whilst image is defined by distinctiveness (Elsbach, 2003). Such a distinction derives from the fact that reputation mirrors the extent to which 'a firm's products, jobs, strategies, and prospects', all of which collectively constitute the firm's status, are enduringly perceived in comparison with its contenders (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Finally, drawing upon the existing literature (Dukerich & Carter, 2000; Fombrun & Rindova, 2000; Dutton et al., 1994), reputation is thought to be solely perceived by external audiences.

Organizational identities can be theorized as '*insiders' relatively enduring perceptions of their organization's fit with distinctiveness categorizations and status categorizations along both general and specific dimensions*' (Elsbach, 2003: p. 305). Unlike image, identity is considered to be considerably more enduring (Dutton et al., 1994), although well-strategized and –implemented identity management can effectively alter an established identity (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). More importantly, identity is a complex construct as it can be defined by both distinctiveness and status (Hatch & Schultz, 2000). What adds to its complexity is that identity integrates both general and specific associations pertaining to an organization (Hatch & Schultz, 2000). Lastly, the concept of organizational identity is exclusive to internal members of an organization (Dutton et al., 1994; Elsbach, 1999).

To conclude, the distinction amongst organizational image, reputation, and identity, as **Table 3** indicates, can be anchored in four dimensions: primary perceivers, defining categorizations, typical endurance, and specificity. As suggested by Elsbach (2003), the term 'OIM' has been typically addressed to signal the management of externally-focused perceptions of organizations such as image. Also, it is evident that the majority of the preceding OIM studies have laid stress on how OIM strategically contributes to the establishment, maintenance, and revitalization of desirable organizational images/impressions (Bolino et al., 2008). In this regard, organizational image/impression is regarded as the particular organizational outcome whereas OIM is treated as the technique employed by organizations to secure such a particular organizational outcome. In other words, organizational image/impression, which is generically assessed by external constituencies, can be viewed as both the motivation and the ultimate goal for OIM implementation (Elsbach, 2003; Bolino et al., 2008).

Therefore, by resonating with Goffman's (1959) metaphorical portrayal of IM, the research scope of the present study is delimited in *Table 4*:

***Table 4: Research Scope of the Present Study***

| Defining elements of OIM | Content                         |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Actor                    | SMEs                            |
| Audience                 | Social media audiences          |
| Performance              | Content posted on social media  |
| Organizational outcome   | Organizational impression/image |

#### **2.2.4 Development of OIM**

Based upon the evaluation of literature published since late 1980s, several features of the development of OIM theory have been synthesized. It is evident that the research scope is constantly expanding. Firstly, scholars have continuously managed to add new insights by extending meanings of some essential components of OIM. For instance, the term 'actor', which initially referred to only organizational representatives such as spokespersons (e.g. Elsbach & Sutton, 1992), now signals a group of media outlets including corporate websites (e.g. Spear & Roper, 2013) and social media homepages (e.g. Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014). Noticeably, such a shift of focus from 'off-line' to 'on-line' has been facilitated by technological advancement over time. Secondly, earlier studies primarily concentrated on external constituencies such as customers (e.g. Elsbach, Sutton, & Principe, 1988) whose perceptions are of great importance to organizational images (Bolino et al., 2008). However, more recent studies also managed to underpin internal members such as employees (e.g. Desai, 2014) who are intimately associated with organizational identities (Elsbach, 2003). Moreover, new dimensions have been added to the way how OIM strategies were defined. In specific, Sandberg & Holmlund (2015) derived eight OIM strategies that firms used in sustainability reporting in an attempt to demonstrate their sustainability-centric actions. Among the eight OIM strategies, four

of them are associated with how firms present their sustainability-related actions (description, praise, admission, and defence), whilst the other four are specific to rhetorical styles (subjective, positive, vague, and emotional) firms adopt in the presentation of their sustainability (Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015). This paper innovatively synthesized four rhetorical styles and regarded them as OIM strategies, given that little earlier research managed to do so. Such rhetoric-centric OIM strategies have also been observed in Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen's (2014) work where the researchers affirmed that the tone (e.g. politeness) used by corporations to communicate with their customers constantly demonstrates some degree of politeness. Finally, some of the established OIM strategies have been advanced by more recent investigations. For instance, Graffin, Haleblan, & Kiley (2016), drawing on expectancy violation theory, proposed a new technique, 'impression offsetting', which in fact have advanced the notion of anticipatory strategies that was first illustrated by studies such as Elsbach, Sutton, & Principe (1988).

### **2.3 OIM Strategies**

This section provides an assessment of OIM strategies present in prior literature. Firstly, it provides a detailed discussion over definitions, underlying motives, and real-world applications of direct OIM strategies. Secondly, descriptions and examples of indirect OIM strategies are offered. Finally, three sets of distinctive OIM strategies, including 'Pre-Emptive strategies', 'Organizational Defamation', and 'Demonstrative & Illustrative strategies', along with how they have been explored in prior literature, are elaborated respectively.

#### **2.3.1 Direct OIM Strategies**

With the ultimate goal of reducing their dependency on key constituents (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Karam, Sekaja, & Geldenhuys, 2016; Rettie, 2009;

Bolino et al., 2008; Jones & Pittman, 1982), organisations employ a variety of OIM strategies that were initially used in interpersonal interactions. It is evident that Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo's (1999) taxonomy of OIM strategies has been most extensively addressed by existing literature. *Table 5* outlines some of the recent publications, in which Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo's (1999) taxonomy is adopted:

***Table 5: Recent Publications Citing Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo's (1999) Taxonomy of OIM Strategies***

| Area   | Author/s                                   | Conceptual/Empirical | Role of OIM  | Role of the taxonomy  |
|--|--|----------------------|--|---|
| Corporate reporting                                  | Windscheid et al. (2016)                   | Empirical            | OIM used to manage organisational gender diversity images on corporate websites                                  | Framework for content analysis                                  |
|  | Sandberg & Holmlund (2015)                 | Empirical            | OIM strategies used to project an image of being sustainable in sustainability reporting                         | Theoretical underpinnings                                       |
|  | Conway, O'Keefe, & Hrasky (2015)           | Empirical            | OIM strategies used to manage stakeholders' perceptions of functional accountability in corporate annual reports | Theoretical underpinnings                                       |
| Corporate social responsibility (CSR) communications | Perks et al. (2013)                        | Empirical            | OIM used to help strategize CSR disclosures  | Theoretical underpinnings & framework for semiological analysis |
|  | Tata & Prasad (2015)                       | Conceptual           | A conceptual model of CSR communications developed based on OIM  | Theoretical underpinnings                                       |
| Financial performance                                | Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans (2013) | Empirical            | OIM used to impact financial performance   | Framework for text mining                                       |
| Strategy-making practice                             | Gegenhuber & Dobusch (2017)                | Empirical            | OIM used to impact open strategy-making  | Part of conceptual framework                                    |
| OIM on social media                                  | Zaharopoulos & Kwok (2017)                 | Empirical            | OIM strategies used by U.S. law firms on Twitter   | Conceptual framework & framework for statistical analysis       |
|  | Benthaus, Risius, & Beck (2016)            | Empirical            | OIM used to strategize social media management   | Theoretical underpinnings                                       |

Drawing upon this taxonomy, these widely employed strategies can be classified into two groups: direct & assertive strategies which intends to establish or maintain a



desired image by proactively steering impressions, and direct & defensive strategies which are purposively designed to protect the established image by governing impressions in response to controversies or image-threatening events (Tetlock & Manstead, 1985; Bolino et al., 2008). The following section will respectively elaborate on what the specific strategies are within each group and how they have been embarked on by prior empirical research.

### 2.3.1.1 Direct & Assertive Strategies

***Table 6: Direct & Assertive OIM Strategies***

| Behaviour                | Definition/Description  |
|--------------------------|---|
| Ingratiation             | Behaviours that are used by organizational actors to make the organization appear more attractive to others   |
| Intimidation             | Behaviours that present the organization as a powerful and dangerous entity which is able and willing to inflict harm on those that frustrate its efforts and objectives  |
| Organizational Promotion | Behaviours that present the organization as being highly competent, effective, and successful by communicating the organization's abilities and accomplishments   |
| Exemplification          | Behaviours that are used by the organization to project images of integrity, social responsibility, and moral worthiness/show the organization as doing more or better than is necessary, going beyond the call of duty, to appear dedicated or superior; this strategy may also have a goal of seeking imitation by other entities |
| Supplication             | Behaviours by the organization that portray an image of dependency and vulnerability for the purpose of soliciting assistance from others/ show the organization's weaknesses or limitations  |

*Sources: based on Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo (1999) and Bolino et al. (2008)*

Organizations employ direct & assertive strategies in an attempt to establish and boost favourable images by communicating information directly pertaining to themselves to their key stakeholders (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016). It is noteworthy that strategies within this category were initially used to explain interpersonal behaviours (Jones & Pittman, 1982) and now they have been extensively applied to the organizational level (e.g. Bolino et al., 2008; Tata & Prasad, 2015; Windscheid et al., 2016; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016; Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017; Zaharopoulos & Kwok, 2017). As **Table 6** indicates, there are five strategies within this category:

‘Ingratiation’, ‘Intimidation’, ‘Organizational Promotion’, ‘Exemplification’, and ‘Supplication’ as discussed below.

Firstly, ‘ingratiating’, in general sense, refers to behaviours that enhance an organization’s attractiveness to its target audiences in pursuit of exerting control over desired rewards (Schlenker, 1980; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Young, Gardner, & Gilbert, 1994). These behaviours include ‘flattering’, ‘favour rendering’, and ‘opinion conformity’ (Bolino et al., 2008). ‘Flattering’ refers to the organization’s attempts, which in most cases are verbal, to compliment target audiences during the interaction in order to be viewed as likeable (Karam, Sekaja, & Geldenhuys, 2016; Bolino et al., 2008). ‘Favour rendering’ embodies actions taken by the organization to provide assistance to satisfy the needs of target audiences (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo’s, 1999; Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2007). ‘Opinion conformity’ incorporates efforts made by the organization in compliance with the opinions of target audiences, regardless of whether it agrees with them or not (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo’s, 1999; Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2007). Overall, to demonstrate how ‘ingratiating’ functions in practice, an example is provided as follows: A mobile-making firm portrays its release of a new range of products featuring multiple colours and different prices as providing more personalised options for customers. This example shows that an organization’s prioritization of a particular practice may be driven to meet the demands of key stakeholders it seeks to impress. Also, corporate advertising is another prevailing implementation of organizational ingratiation (Sethi, 1977). Unlike brand advertising which is oriented to increase sales, corporate advertising is specialised to positively shape perceptions others form of the organization (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo’s, 1999; Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2007). For instance, an oil-drilling company may publicize its environmentally

friendly technologies in ways particularly targeting customers who are highly concerned about corporate commitment to the natural environment.

Secondly, ‘intimidation’ is employed by organisations with the purpose of being viewed as dangerous and powerful (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo’s, 1999; Karam, Sekaja, & Geldenhuys, 2016). Such a strategy may induce perceptions that organizations are capable and keen to impose damage to those who impede their efforts to achieve particular goals. Intimidation is especially directed at those whose survival largely relies upon the target organization (Oliver, 1991) and the most prominent example for regularly demonstrating coercive power is military force (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). In the commercial sector, this strategy is normally exercised by large firms to impose a threat on their small partners that the number of orders will be shrunken if the small partners continue to trade with their business rivals (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). Nevertheless, in some occasions, the small partners may ward off such a threat with intimidation played back to the large firms as well as they may threaten to publicize evidence of the coercion imposed by the large firms to arouse public attention in order to gain social and legal support (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017). As a consequence, ‘intimidation’ is not suitable for all types of organizations as it demands power possessed over the target (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999).

Thirdly, ‘organizational promotion’ serves to exhibit organizational competence (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Bolino et al., 2008; Windscheid et al., 2016). In this case, competence represents the extent to which an organization successfully performs a task (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017). To achieve this end, an organization may seek to propagate their accomplishments in ways that are tailored to maximize the favourable implications for

the organization (Spear, 2015; Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2007). This can be affirmed by institutional theory that if an organisation attains certain organisational achievements, especially those certified by external parties such as media or governmental bodies (e.g. Kistruck et al., 2015; Marlow & McAdam, 2015; Fisher et al., 2017), it is perceived as legitimate (Fisher et al., 2017; Cohen & Dean, 2005; Tornikoski and Newbert, 2007). There are two sub-strategies that can be applied to organizational settings: ‘entitlements’ and ‘enhancements’ (Tedeschi & Norman, 1985; Bolino et al., 2008). ‘Entitlements’ are assertions made by an organization to hold responsible for outcomes and consequences that are perceived as possible (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Bolino et al., 2008). When the causes of organizational performances are rather difficult to discern, organisations often display self-serving attributions (Staw et al., 1983; Salancik & Meindl, 1984). An organization’s self-serving attributions, as a resemblance of their counterparts at the individual level, are biased expositions of positive outcomes or performances as resulting from the abilities and endeavours of the organization (Staw et al., 1983; Salancik & Meindl, 1984). Typical representations of such expositions are available through a spokesperson’s statements (e.g. Elsbach & Sutton, 1992), corporate stories presented on official websites (e.g. Spear & Roper, 2013) and annual reports (e.g. Bettman & Weitz, 1983). ‘Enhancements’ normally signify an exaggeration of positive organisational actions or accomplishments (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Bolino et al., 2008). When the value of such actions or accomplishments are ambiguous or underestimated, organizations are inclined to polish these attributions to arouse the public recognition of their competence (Spear, 2015; Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2007; Jones & Pittman, 1982). For instance, a company may claim that

their minor growth in profit is achieved irrespective of the market conditions following a financial crisis.

Moreover, ‘exemplification’ is designed to convey impressions of moral worthiness, integrity, and commitment to the society (Jones & Pittman, 1982). Unlike the preceding strategies, exemplification lays stress on the ‘*social and aesthetic qualities*’ rather than exhibit attributes such as attractiveness or competence (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999: P. 122). In this regard, this strategy is most seen in organizations’ commitment to different aspects of the society such as public service, community improvements, and environmental protection (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Bolino et al., 2008). Such commitment can be disclosed through various platforms such as spokespersons’ announcements (e.g. Elasbach & Sutton, 1992), sustainability reports (e.g. Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015), and corporate stories (e.g. Spear & Roper, 2013).

Finally, organizations adopt ‘supplication’ to solicit help from others by showing their weaknesses and deficiencies (Jones & Pittman, 1982). This strategy portrays organizations as impotent in accomplishing required tasks (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo’s, 1999). It is important to notice that they often attribute such impotencies to external determinants such as market transformation or business misfortune (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo’s, 1999; Spear, 2015). More importantly, in order to optimize this strategy, organizations also depict their impotencies as temporary (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo’s, 1999; Spear, 2015). Besides, such supplicating behaviours are advantageous when organizations seek to legitimize their request for greater resources to convince relevant stakeholders to offer additional support as the predetermined demands of these stakeholders will be relaxed (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). For instance, domestic start-up enterprises

may emphasize the scarcity of resources to solicit administrative protection that will shield them off emerging competitors overseas.

Overall, direct & assertive strategies are intended to reduce organizational dependence <sup>1</sup> and consolidate organizational power in relation to relevant constituencies (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Bolino et al., 2008). Also, the underlying motive for each of these five strategies under this category is respectively associated with organizations' desire to be perceived as 'attractive' (ingratiation), 'dangerous' (intimidation), 'competent' (organizational promotion), 'morally worthy' (exemplification), and 'needy' (supplication). Hence, these five organisational impressions serve to motivate the implementation of the corresponding OIM strategies (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo's, 1999; Richey, Ravishankar & Coupland, 2016).

Existing literature has primarily assessed how organizations assertively carry out OIM strategies on a regular basis to influence their stakeholders (e.g. Avery & McKay, 2006; Davidson et al., 2004; Long, Doerer & Stewart, 2015). Studies within this realm have placed their focus onto OIM strategies specialised to nurture, strengthen, and optimize the relationship between organizations and their key stakeholders. For instance, drawing upon existing literature of OIM, marketing, social psychology, and recruitment, Avery & McKay (2006) formulated a theoretical framework regarding how organizations form their recruitment strategies to attract female, ethnic or racial minority job applicants. This established framework is primarily grounded upon four assertive OIM strategies to shape the generic corporate employment image and three defensive OIM strategies to tackle potential contingencies (Avery & McKay, 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> 'Supplication' is effective in scaling down organizational dependence in the short run, although it tends to do the opposite in a holistic view (e.g. Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999).

This study, although being purely theoretical, implied that assertive OIM strategies effectively helped communicate the reputation of diversity<sup>2</sup> to the target job applicants (Avery & McKay, 2006). Another piece of research conducted by Davidson et al. (2004) investigated the usage of assertive OIM by individuals placed in the dual role of CEO and chairperson in reporting organizational earnings. The findings suggested that earnings management that necessitated assertive OIM strategies was more frequently performed by leaders in the adjunct positions (i.e. CEO and chairperson) than otherwise. Also, it is indicated that such OIM emerged most likely following the periods of poor organizational performance. Similarly, Long, Doerer & Stewart (2015: p. 175) conducted a virtual ethnographic study, with data collected from 100 corporate websites across industries, in an attempt to understand what methods organizations took to strategically communicate ‘*diversity philosophy, practices, and policies*’. They discovered that OIM was regarded as one of the three typical strategies to sell, tell, and frame organizational diversity message (Long, Doerer & Stewart, 2015). However, in this case OIM was barely elaborated in terms of its rhetorical and symbolic application in those websites. To add to the confusion, the two strategies derived by the researchers, persuasion and strategic ambiguity, were occasionally described as sub-forms of OIM, while they were referred to as paralleling strategies with OIM elsewhere (e.g. abstract). Judging by how these two strategies were defined, there are evidently some shared grounds between some of the OIM strategies and these two<sup>3</sup>. Thus, this study ought to better integrate OIM literature with its findings in which the similarities of these strategies should be highlighted.

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<sup>2</sup> Demonstration of an organization’s capacity to accommodate employees of different races, ethnicities, and genders such as a women-friendly working environment

<sup>3</sup> ‘Selling’, as one of the sub-strategies of persuasion, sometimes involves with showing off organizational achievements just like ‘organizational promotion’ does. See Long, Doerer & Stewart (2015) for details.

### 2.3.1.2 Direct & Defensive Strategies

**Table 7: Direct & Defensive OIM Strategies**

| Behaviour                   | Definition/Description  |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Accounts                    | Explanations of a predicament-creating event which seek to minimize the apparent severity of the predicament                              |
| Disclaimers                 | Explanations given prior to a potentially embarrassing action in order to ward off any negative repercussions for the actor's image       |
| Organizational Handicapping | Efforts by an organization to make task success appear unlikely in order to provide a readymade excuse for failure                        |
| Apologies                   | Admissions of blameworthiness for a negative event, which include expressions of remorse and requests for a pardon                        |
| Restitution                 | Offers of compensation, which are extended by the organization to the offended, injured, or otherwise, harmed audience                    |
| Pro-social Behaviour        | Engaging in pro-social actions to atone for an apparent transgression and convince the audience that the actor merits a positive identity |

*Sources: based on Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo (1999) and Bolino et al. (2008)*

Direct & defensive strategies are designed as the responsive mechanism to completely eschew plausible controversies, minimise the negative influence of disputable events, or deflect attention away from sensitive actions (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Bolino et al., 2008; Ogden & Clarke, 2005). Unlike the assertive strategies discussed above that are purposively used to minimise organizational dependence on relevant constituencies, they are intended to shield organizational dependence from being elevated by intensified constituent demands (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Diers-Lawson & Pang, 2016). As **Table 7** shows, there are six strategies under this category: ‘Accounts’, ‘Disclaimers’, ‘Organizational Handicapping’, ‘Apologies’, ‘Restitution’, and ‘Pro-social Behaviour’.

‘Accounts’ represent efforts made by organizations to restore and remedy their pre-established reputation in the wake of disputable events (Ginzel et al., 1992; Schlenker, 1980). Such efforts are often exercised in ways that manage to minimize the apparent severity of the controversies (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992; Schlenker, 1980). This strategy is constituted by three fundamental building blocks: ‘denials or defences of innocence’, ‘excuses’, and ‘justifications’ as discussed below.



Firstly, ‘denials or defences of innocence’ are employed to directly reject external accusations that the organization should be held responsible for the cause of or has tangibly capitalized on controversial events (Schlenker, 1980; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). For instance, pharmaceutical companies may deny public questionings against the toxicity of their products and clarify that their drugs will inflict no accumulative harm to patients in need of a high dosage and any emerging incompatible symptom or discomfort of such patients has been caused by violations of medical instructions. Another strategy that has a similar effect is termed as ‘active concealing’ (Sutton & Callahan, 1987; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). By deliberately hiding information away from external constituencies, this strategy aims to eschew the further escalation of plausible threats to the organizational image and allow more time to make amends and craft a better OIM strategy (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). This strategy can be identified from the rhetoric of financial reports following poor performances (e.g. Benthaus, 2014).

Secondly, ‘excuses’ refer to behaviors that acknowledge the disruptiveness of an act but deny accountability for its negative implications (Tedeschi & Riess, 1981). Organizations adopting this strategy often attribute their misconducts to unavoidable external causes (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). For example, an enterprise is likely to mask its imminent layoffs with the alleged influence of a global financial crisis.

Thirdly, ‘justifications’ reflect an organization’s intent to vindicate a wrongdoing by highlighting its rationality (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013). This strategy normally occurs when the organization is in no position to deny full, or at least some, responsibility for the negative consequences of the wrongdoing (Perks et al., 2013). According to Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo

(1999), such a wrongdoing can be validated in three ways: 1) minimizing its negativity ('it is not bad at all'); 2) depicting it as a universal act within the industry ('everybody else is doing so'); and 3) redefining it as a necessity to embrace a broader set of values ('it is necessary for a greater purpose').

Further, 'disclaimers' are specialised in preparation for potential disputes (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Conway, O'Keefe, & Hrasky, 2015). Businesses are often equipped with such a strategy to fend off in advance any ambiguity of the liability in their trading activities (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Conway, O'Keefe, & Hrasky, 2015). It is frequently seen in online shopping sites as the 'return policy' of some E-commerce retailers typically includes a disclaimer regarding customers' responsibility for the shipping cost of the returned products and the approximate time to process the return requests.

'Organizational handicapping', as analogous to its root at the individual level, namely, 'individual handicapping', involves organizational behaviours that purposefully overstate the unmanageability of the required tasks so that failures will more likely be tolerated (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). For instance, a nascent firm may alert its resource providers to the possible outcome that their investments will not pay off in the short run due to substantial start-up costs and a lack of social networks.

'Apologies' are used when organizations accept full or partial accountability for a misconduct and expect forgiveness from affected parties in return (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). Unsurprisingly, it is implied that 'apologies' may not be a regular strategy as it most likely induces negative outcomes such as legal liability (Ginzel et al., 1992). Nonetheless, when there is solid evidence to prove it guilty, the organization that finds no alternative remedies feasible, may inevitably resort to

‘apologies’ for mitigating the current negative circumstance (Ginzel et al., 1992). In doing so, coupled with a guarantee of future improvement, the organization may retain a positive relationship with its stakeholders (Ginzel et al., 1992). For instance, an oil giant may apologize for the oil leakage that has started to contaminate the ocean and marine inhabitants after having undergone fierce criticisms.

‘Restitution’ advances ‘apologies’ as it offers tangible compensation to affected parties (Tedeschi & Norman, 1985; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). It has now become an integral part of business activities. For instance, restaurants may grant a discount for customers who have publically voiced their discontent about the quality of the dishes.

Finally, ‘pro-social behaviour’ signals an organization’s intent to redeem its reputation from an evident misdemeanour in a broader pro-social context (Tedeschi & Norman, 1980; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). The employment of this strategy involves efforts made by the organization to engage in related pro-social conducts in order to convince its audiences that those conducts can benefit the cohort of the affected parties (Tedeschi & Norman, 1980). For example, a multinational firm may fund campaigns against racial discrimination after one of its top managers racially abused a subordinate of a different ethnicity.

Existing literature marks several studies which have concentrated on how organizations employ direct & defensive OIM strategies to regain legitimacy in the wake of disputable or image-damaging events (e.g. Elsbach, Sutton, & Principe, 1988; Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Marcus & Goodman, 1991; Elsbach, 1994; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Messer & Shriver, 2009; Desai, 2014; Jenkins, Anandarajan & D’Ovidio, 2014). Firstly, Elsbach & Sutton (1992) advanced a process model portraying how

illegitimate actions taken by social movement organizations ultimately contributed to regaining organizational legitimacy. According to their research, defensive IM strategies, such as ‘accounts’ with reference to organizational structure, were regarded effective in distracting external constituencies’ attention away from actions that were deemed illegitimate in general and hence strengthening the credibility of the interpretations offered by the organization’s representatives which in their case refer to spokesperson (Elasbach & Sutton, 1992). They also put forward a compelling conclusion that the violation of norms upheld by the resource suppliers might become an essential first step for organizations to acquire legitimacy (Elasbach & Sutton, 1992). This notion contradicts one of the most widely acknowledged standpoints in institutional theory that organizations must act in ways that accommodate the prevalent social norms so as to increase perceived credibility and gain organizational legitimacy (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Zucker, 1986). Coupled with the proclaimed generalizability of the findings in alternative settings, this study is believed to provide intriguing insights for both theory and practice.

Later, Elsbach (1994) repeated the study in the context of cattle industry on how spokespersons used defensive IM strategies to restore legitimacy in the wake of controversial events. In this case, two distinctive forms of defensive IM, namely, ‘acknowledgements’ and ‘denials’ were put under examination (Elsbach, 1994). The conclusion, put simply, confirmed that acknowledgements substantially outperformed denials in an attempt to reduce the negative influence caused by controversies and protect organizational legitimacy (Elsbach, 1994). This study also shed light on how audiences with different backgrounds differ in their responses to and expectations of the verbal accounts taken by spokesperson (Elsbach, 1994). It suggested that non-expert audiences expected the organization to offer evidence that the disputable

actions were performed in conformity with the prevailing and normative practices, whereas experts paid more attention to technological issues (Elsbach, 1994). In contrast with the earlier study conducted in the context of social movement organizations, this study implicitly supported the idea that the acquisition of organizational legitimacy was dictated by not conflicting with the established principles that pervaded the relevant domain. Thus, such inconsistency has challenged the wider application of Elsbach & Sutton's (1992) finding that violation of any form of social norms contributes to defending organizational legitimacy.

Moreover, from different perspectives, Marcus & Goodman (1991) and Ravasi & Schultz (2006) both empirically affirmed the usefulness of defensive IM strategies in response to crises and identity threats. The former indicated that it was imperative for an organization to adopt a defensive approach for announcing and justifying its managerial policies following crises, rather than solely serve the particular interest of its stockholders (Marcus & Goodman, 1991). The latter is a longitudinal study that kept monitoring a single firm for approximately seven decades. It highlighted 'sense-giving' actions intended to shape internal perceptions towards the identity of the company in response to environmental changes over time (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). As was suggested, multiple mechanisms were used to optimize the cultivation and maintenance of the favoured corporate image (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). For example, corporate slogans signifying the preferred corporate identity were widely quoted on many platforms such as annual reports and corporate website (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). To circulate the projected image within its network, the company even invited its dealers to take training courses on a regular basis (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). It is worth highlighting that the defensive IM in this case scenario targeted not only external constituencies, but also internal members of the organization such as

employees. In other words, IM strategies were primarily implemented by the company in an attempt to minimise the negative influence imposed by the changing environment on its employees.

More recently, Messer & Shriver (2009) provided an in-depth, single-cased examination of how a firm respond to external allegations of environmental misconduct from an OIM perspective. Fieldwork and thematic content analysis were synthesized to co-yield findings that suggested some of the prestigious defensive OIM were customized in response to claimed environmental impropriety (Messer & Shriver, 2009). Specifically, various accounts featuring excuses and justifications were all contributory in the firm's effort to diffuse its responsibility to local environment (Messer & Shriver, 2009). It also innovatively pointed out that those accounts were often drawn from relevant official entities such as 'Environmental Protection Agency', implying that the firm's accused actions were consistent with existing regulations and hence questioning such actions was a disrespect to the authority (Messer & Shriver, 2009).

Furthermore, Desai (2014) integrated organizational learning and OIM to assess how organizations capitalized on public disclosures for shaping perceptions following failures of distinguished levels (minor and major). This study offered an intriguing proposition that the use of OIM exerted an indirect impact on the course of organizational learning (Desai, 2014). In specific, public disclosure pertaining particular OIM strategies to conceal information about or divert attention away from minor failures might induce an interference with internal learning which was often impeded in such situations, whereas OIM strategies serving the same purpose in the wake of major failures were more likely to intensify public scrutiny and in return propel the learning process (Desai, 2014). The reason for such diverse impacts is that

audiences' impressions were more malleable in the context of minor failures (Desai, 2014). Besides, this study also recognised that OIM applied in public disclosures could perhaps unintentionally distract the audiences away from contributing to organizations' internal learning efforts due to the disguising effect OIM imposed on audiences' perceptions towards organizational failures and hence their demands for improvement, which was a main driving force for organizations' internal learning (Desai, 2014). Nevertheless, this study is subject to its excessive emphasis on the volume of disclosures. In other words, the content of disclosures, in which specific OIM strategies were embedded, was neglected. So, such a limitation calls for further explorations in discerning whether particular OIM strategies have independent effects on organizational learning.

Finally, Jenkins, Anandarajan & D'Ovidio (2014), based on a content analysis and an experiment, investigated the role of OIM in the event of a data breach in which case organizations are obligated to notify their customers about the leakage of their personally identifiable information (PII). According to the experiment that gauged OIM's effect on the recipients of specialised notification letters, it is suggested that the way organizations rhetorically craft their notification letter efficaciously affect customers' responses to such PII-related events (Jenkins, Anandarajan & D'Ovidio, 2014). To be precise, the pervasive use of 'apology' was found effective to ward off discontent of the affected customers (Jenkins, Anandarajan & D'Ovidio, 2014). However, the content analysis revealed an incongruence between the simulation and the reality. In practice, the notification letters showed low incidence of apology, indicative of the fact that most organizations were not adequately aware of the effect of such OIM strategies in turning crises into opportunities (Jenkins, Anandarajan & D'Ovidio, 2014). Apart from the reason that sending notification letters were only

viewed as a routine task mandated by law (in United States), such an incongruence may stem from the simplified sample of the simulative experiment. Specifically, the experiment only incorporated a student sample with which the findings could be limited to such a population. In doing so, the representativeness of the sample was at stake as certain variations across customers with different features such as age, ethnicity, nationality, and educational background, all of which might affect the results of the experiment, were not taken into account. Thus, direct & defensive OIM at the organizational level is largely oriented towards legitimacy acquisition in order to tackle controversies that may induce damage to organizations' image, identity, and reputation and that explains why many scholars sought to integrate OIM and institutional theory in an attempt to interpret how organizations managed to justify their actions in such occasions.

### 2.3.2 Indirect OIM Strategies

Indirect OIM strategies signal an organization's intent to diminish its reliance on targeted constituencies using indirect means by which another entity is often involved (Cialdini, 1989; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). These indirect strategies can also be divided into, as analogous to the direct strategies, two groups: indirect & assertive strategies and indirect & defensive Strategies (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999), as shown respectively in *Table 8* and *Table 9*.

#### 2.3.2.1 Indirect & Assertive Strategies

*Table 8: Indirect & Assertive OIM Strategies*

|           |                    | Behaviour  | Definition/Description  |
|-----------|--------------------|------------|---|
| Assertive | Connection-Focused | Boasting   | Proclaiming a positive link to a favourable other                   |
|           |                    | Blaring    | Proclaiming a negative link to an unfavourable other                |
|           | Other-Focused      | Burnishing | Enhancing the favourable features of a positively linked other      |
|           |                    | Blasting   | Exaggerating the unfavourable features of a negatively linked other |

*Sources: based on Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo (1999) and Bolino et al. (2008)*



As was discussed above, there are two sets of OIM strategies under this category: assertive connection-focused strategies and assertive other-focused strategies. The former include ‘boasting’ and ‘blaring’ which co-contribute to facilitating an organization’s image in ways that forge and govern relationships between the organization and another entity (Cialdini, 1989; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). From a legitimacy perspective, it is indicated in the existing literature that a positive association with other notable actors in a field (e.g. partners, celebrities, and industrial members) can convince other audiences that the organisation has obtained evaluative approval and thereby ought to be legitimised (Rindova et al., 2007; Fisher et al., 2017). For instance, a company may claim official sponsorship of the Olympic Games. Although the Olympic Games promote nothing pertaining to the quality of the company’s products or services, its universally recognized characteristics (i.e. ‘faster, higher, stronger’) which mirror some of the best traits of humans, may warrant positive perceptions from audiences. On the contrary, instance of the apparent utility of ‘blaring’ is that a restaurant guarantees its food as MSG-free (Monosodium Glutamate, known as a widely used flavour enhancer) after public doubts are cast on the seasoning’s impact on physical fitness.

Also, assertive other-focused strategies, consisting of ‘burnishing’ and ‘blasting’, are intended to reinforce an organization’s image in ways that control its relationships that are already established with another entity (Cialdini, 1989; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). ‘Burnishing’ refers to acts that boost desirable traits of an entity that is already positively associated with the organization (Cialdini, 1989; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Windscheid et al., 2016). For instance, a clothing brand may publically extol the aestheticism upheld by a prestigious designer who is leading

the design of its new collection. In a similar vein, ‘blasting’ is carried out by an organization to overstate the undesirability of a negatively associated entity (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Windscheid et al., 2016). For example, a film production firm may hire netizens to besmirch movies produced by its rivals via social media.

### 2.3.2.2 Indirect & Defensive Strategies

**Table 9: Indirect & Defensive OIM Strategies**

|  |                    | Behaviour  | Definition/Description  |
|--|--------------------|------------|---|
| Defensive  | Connection-Focused | Burying    | Disclaiming or obscuring a positive link to an unfavourable other |
|  |                    | Blurring   | Disclaiming or obscuring a negative link to a favourable other    |
|  | Other-Focused      | Boosting   | Minimizing the unfavourable features of a positively linked other |
|  |                    | Belittling | Minimizing the favourable traits of a negatively linked other.    |
| Sources: based on Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo (1999) and Bolino et al. (2008) |                    |            |   |

Organizations employ defensive connection-focused strategies to establish and govern their relationships with another entity so as to restore organizational image (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Bolino et al., 2008). ‘Burying’ serves to disavow and withhold a positive link between an organization and another entity that is negatively perceived by the public (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016). One typical example for applications of this strategy is that a football club publicizes its decision to sack players who were involved in a scandal. As opposed to ‘burying’, ‘blurring’ signal behaviours oriented to cloak a negative link to a desirable entity (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016). For instance, a political party downplays its past critiques against a policy that is recognised as effective at present.

With the purpose of shielding an organization’s image from external threats, it becomes imperative to employ defensive other-focused strategy in an attempt to dictate the

public perceptions of a linked entity. ‘Boosting’ tends to minimize the undesirability embedded in a positively associated other (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). For instance, a business may deliberately downplay plausible ecological damages brought by its expansion to a new region. When it comes to ‘belittling’, organizations often seek to divert attentions away from or weaken the desirable characteristics of a negatively related entity (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). A notable application of this strategy is reflected from criticisms publicized by some companies that although their rivals’ products have gained growing popularity among customers, these products lack endorsements from professionals in the industry.

### **2.3.3 OIM Strategies with Distinctive Purposes**

Some OIM strategies identified in the literature serve distinctive purposes that separate them with the preceding strategies (e.g. Graffin, Haleblan & Kiley, 2016; Mohamed & Gardner, 2004; Bansal & Kistruck, 2006). In other words, they cannot be simply categorized as assertive or defensive as they neither strive to proactively construct an organizational image or protect such an image in response to emerging controversies. These strategies are used beyond the previous contexts and hence they have departed from being purely assertive or defensive to being preventive (e.g. Graffin, Haleblan & Kiley, 2016), defamatory (e.g. Mohamed & Gardner, 2004), and demonstrative & illustrative (e.g. Bansal & Kistruck, 2006). The following section offers a detailed discussion over each of ‘pre-emptive strategies’, ‘organizational defamation’, and ‘demonstrative & illustrative strategies’ and how each set of strategies has been implemented in practice.

#### **2.3.3.1 Pre-Emptive OIM Strategies**

Pre-emptive strategies, also known as anticipatory strategies, are employed by organizations in ways that assertively minimise the likelihood of potential disputes or

conflicts (Elsbach et al., 1998; Tyler et al., 2012). Prior research has documented how organizations use OIM strategies to avert undesirable responses to forthcoming events (e.g. Elsbach et al., 1998; Arndt & Bigelow, 2000; Siegel & Brockner, 2005; Tyler et al., 2012; Boiral, 2016; Graffin, Haleblan & Kiley, 2016). One of the initial endeavours to embark on the pre-emptive IM strategies was made by Elsbach et al. (1998) in an empirical study of hospital billing practices. In this case, the role of defensive IM strategies was initiative rather than responsive as organizational representatives ‘struck first’ to ward off any potential conflicts when they suspected that their organizations might be held responsible for a negative event (Elsbach et al., 1998). In specific, unlike the above-mentioned defensive IM strategies that seek to enhance positive perceptions regarding organizations and hence regain legitimacy, trust, or credibility (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Marcus & Goodman, 1991), the ‘anticipatory IM strategies’ formulated here were intended to distract, overwhelm, or diminish attention to a forthcoming event and prompt emotions propelling thoughtless consent to organizational requests (Elsbach et al., 1998). In this regard, they also developed a range of IM strategies entitled ‘anticipatory obfuscation’ that resembles the way how assertive IM strategies such as self-promotion work in practice, although some of the specific strategies (e.g. bureaucracy) in this category are not entirely proactive in nature (Elsbach et al., 1998). This anticipatory approach was not only effective in reducing the volume of complaints (Elsbach et al., 1998), but also provided an alternative solution for organizations in the target industry (hospitals) to avoid using remedial strategies such as justifications and excuses which were deemed more vulnerable in defending organizations’ image than countermeasures with more accommodating effect (Elsbach, 1994). Nevertheless, it is explicitly acknowledged that the generalisability of such findings in diverse contexts is subject to further

inspection, since some of the anticipatory IM strategies may only be optimized by organizations in which service encounters are an integral part of their daily routine (Elsbach, 1994). More recently, Tyler et al. (2012) singled out organizations' proactive use of anticipatory OIM and further investigated its effect in diminishing disputes at the initial stage and avoiding the escalation of extant controversies. Building upon the theoretical and analytical model derived by Elsbach et al. (1998), the researchers offered experimental evidences to support the tenets of the prior model and hence empirically ascertained that anticipatory OIM was pre-emptively effective in addressing the initial and potential organizational challenges (Tyler et al., 2012). Nevertheless, like the earlier exploration, the effectiveness of the pre-emptive OIM strategies tested in this study remains unknown when applied in a radically different context. In specific, only a student sample was used to yield findings consistent with that of the original study. So, it is doubtable if the findings remain consistent with a wider population that consists of respondents that differ in educational background, occupation, age, ethnicity, and other variables that are presumably decisive in mediating the role of anticipatory OIM. Besides, the experiments were conducted in the same industry (Hospital). Therefore, it remains uncharted if industry is an influential variable regarding the results. One possible solution is replicating the study in a broader context with a diverse group of research subject. It was until most recently that anticipatory OIM's efficacy in a more business-wise context was thoroughly explored.

In 2016, Haleblan & Kiley (2016), drawing on expectancy violation theory, found that impression offsetting, a sub-technique of anticipatory OIM, which was exercised by firm executives, efficaciously facilitated shareholders' positive reactions to acquisition announcements and thus constrained observers' impressions of events

resulting in a possible negative expectancy violation (an actor's behaviours fail to live up to existing expectations). It was revealed that when firm executives estimated a plausible negative expectancy violation by observers, they simultaneously launched positive, yet uncorrelated press conferences about an acquisition announcement (Graffin, Haleblan & Kiley, 2016). Moreover, such a distinctive form of anticipatory OIM was intensified in response to riskier acquisitions (Graffin, Haleblan & Kiley, 2016). Further, evidence was discovered that the use of anticipatory OIM further inhibited a shrinkage of market capitalization by mediating the market reactions towards the acquisition announcements (Graffin, Haleblan & Kiley, 2016). Although this study empirically affirmed the efficacy of anticipatory OIM in a new spectrum, it cannot be overlooked that its findings are entirely grounded upon the researchers' inferences of the motivation that underlies organizational leaders' efforts in issuing press releases, as only the behaviours were observable. Thus, future research is recommended to engage in more direct enquiries such as interviews to better comprehend the motives of anticipatory OIM.

Apart from studies investigating anticipatory OIM alone, a content analysis of hospitals' annual reports conducted by Arndt & Bigelow (2000) revealed that the organizations' presentation of their structural innovation largely relied upon the implementation of defensive IM strategies in a preventive manner so as to induce '*legitimated accounts*' (Meyer & Rowan, 1977: p. 350) and hence pave the way for corporate restructuring. In doing so, a series of defensive IM strategies were orchestrated in the following manner: 1) excuse: the organization declared that its departure from established practices was never a wilful act by regarding external pressure as the drive for structural alteration (Arndt & Bigelow, 2000); 2) justification: the organization claimed that the imminent changes were essential for the

organization's survival and for the maintenance of its appreciated services (Arndt & Bigelow, 2000); 3) disclaimer: the organization depicted its decision to restructure as carefully pondered and reassured that no alteration would apply to the way it normally interacted with its key stakeholders (Arndt & Bigelow, 2000). During the whole process, the innovativeness of the structural change was downplayed to distract the attention to the discrepancy between the original and the new structure (Arndt & Bigelow, 2000). Since this research was conducted in a context featuring robust institutional and technological elements (Arndt & Bigelow, 2000), it is subject to future exploration whether the findings still make sense with other settings characterized by comparatively weak institutional and technological environments.

Additionally, Siegel & Brockner (2005) addressed a particular defensive IM strategy at the individual level, self-handicapping, and extended it to organizational settings. Here, self-handicapping performed by CEOs, who were viewed as the representatives of the organizations, was intended to warn relevant stakeholders in terms of both internal and external factors that might impede future organizational performance (Siegel & Brockner, 2005). Therefore, this study still falls under the category of OIM. The major finding of this study was that under conditions where the firm had previously yielded desirable outcomes, claimed handicapping associated with external factors such as environmental change had diametrically adverse impact on CEO pay and firm value (a positive impact on CEO pay whilst a negative effect on firm value) (Siegel & Brockner, 2005). This study contributes to the OIM literature by demonstrating that the influence of self-handicapping exercised by individuals is not limited to individual performance. It also extends to the organization they represented. From a methodological perspective, it exemplified in OIM domain how two inherently

different methods (an experiment and archival study) for data collection coexisted and the triangulation of the mixed methods yielded consistent results.

Finally, Boiral (2016) revealed that OIM was also an integral part in the process of defending organizational commitment to diversity. The author explored how organizations in mining industry addressed their accountability for biodiversity so as to rationalize their influence in such an area (Boiral, 2016). Data collected from 148 sustainability reports indicated effective use of rhetoric aimed to positively frame impressions of stakeholders. Here, the effective rhetoric was prosecuted through the technique of neutralisation and optimistic statements (Boiral, 2016). Although termed differently, the concept of 'optimistic statements' contains elements analogous to defensive OIM such as justifications, making it intertwined with OIM to a certain degree where OIM was carefully crafted to serve the purpose of rhetorically legitimizing and explaining negative impacts to key stakeholders. Therefore, this study is believed to have added insights to the existing literature concerning how OIM is addressed in a preventive way.

### **2.3.3.2 Organizational Defamation**

Defamation with organizational settings signifies the use of OIM by organizations in an attempt to deliberately traumatize the image of other entities, most noticeably, their rivals (Bolino et al., 2008). It is important to point out that organizational defamation indeed has some shared grounds with some of the indirect & defensive strategies discussed above (e.g. belittling) since they both involve behaviours intended to spoil images of targeted others (Mohamed & Gardner, 2004). Nonetheless, defamation is exercised by firms in ways that sometimes entail fabrication or distortion of information which is substantively severer than overstatement of unfavourable features of a rival (Bolino et al., 2008; Mohamed & Gardner, 2004). Besides, the



linked entity in indirect strategies comes from both outside (e.g. positive traits of a competitor) and within the organization (e.g. negative traits of the organization itself), whereas defamation is exclusively directed at external constituencies (Mohamed & Gardner, 2004). As a consequence, organizational defamation has been singled out for assessment.

There is a limited number of studies that have concentrated on organizational defamation (e.g. Mohamed & Gardner, 2004). The most notable example is Mohamed & Gardner's (2004) exploratory study that specified what constructed some of the strategies of organizational defamation and how these strategies were implemented. In this study, some of the defensive OIM strategies were not exclusively specialized to protect a firm's own image by justifying controversial actions (Mohamed & Gardner, 2004). Instead, they were largely employed to defame another entity so as to escape external accusations (Mohamed & Gardner, 2004). For instance, using the strategy of 'excuse', a firm might scold a former partner for the poor performance under its management to divert the attention away from the unreasonable termination of the partnership initiated by the firm itself (Mohamed & Gardner, 2004). Put differently, the incompetence of the partner was fabricated by the firm to rationalize its disputable decision against the partner. Therefore, this study offers insights in understanding organizational usage of OIM strategies from such an extreme perspective and hence it manages to enrich the OIM literature.

### **2.3.3.3 Demonstrative and Illustrative Strategies**

In 2006, Bansal & Kistruck (2006) formulated two new forms of assertive OIM: illustrative and demonstrative strategies in an attempt to assess the stakeholders' perceptions of OIM employed by companies to disclose environmental commitment. In this study, illustrative strategies are defined as actions that *'provide images of,*

*and/or broad-brush comments about, the firm's commitment to the natural environment*', whereas demonstrative strategies signal actions that *'provide specific facts and details about the firm's operations'* (Bansal & Kistruck, 2006: p. 165). In this regard, the former projects broad generalizations so as to cultivate desirable organizational images, whereas the latter relies upon the manifestation of the organization's specific activities to contribute to environmental protection (Bansal & Kistruck, 2006). To maximise the effect of these two strategies, it is implied that these two should be carried out concurrently as their target groups are different (Bansal & Kistruck, 2006). This study contributes to the conceptualization of OIM as it illuminates the categorization of prior OIM strategies and sheds light on the effect of organizational transparency based on a stakeholders' perspective.

## **2.4 Summary**

The review of existing OIM studies indicates that IM has been successfully extended to, and even pervasively implemented at the organizational level (e.g. Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Bolino et al., 2008; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016; Zaharopoulos & Kwok, 2017). The landscape of the existing OIM studies is anchored in four aspects. Firstly, it is indicated that organizational representatives have been proactively engaged in OIM for multifaceted organizational purposes (e.g. Bolino et al., 2008; Siegel & Brockner, 2005; Tata & Prasad, 2015; Desai, 2014). In this regard, OIM is escalated by the interplay between individual representatives such as CEOs (e.g. Siegel & Brockner, 2005; Davidson et al., 2004) and spokespersons (e.g. Elsbach, 2003) and organizational images. Secondly, OIM theory has also been employed to help interpret a variety of organisational phenomena such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) (e.g. Tata & Prasad, 2015), organizational learning (e.g. Desai, 2014), and organizational diversity (e.g. Boiral, 2016). From a methodological

perspective, both explanatory (e.g. Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013) and exploratory studies (e.g. Long, Doerer & Stewart, 2015) have been employed by prior OIM studies. Besides, multiple methods have been used by existing OIM studies including pure theoretical papers (e.g. Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2011), content analysis (e.g. Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013), interviews (e.g. Benthous, Disius, & Beck, 2016), simulative experiments (e.g. Seigel & Brockner, 2005), and longitudinal case studies (e.g. Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). This has secured OIM's capacity to accommodate research with different paradigms. Finally, extant OIM literature demonstrates that data can be collected from a variety of sources including hospital billings (e.g. Elsbach et al., 1998), Verbal announcements of spokespersons (e.g. Elsbach, 1994), notification letters to customers (e.g. Jenkins, Anandarajan, & D'Ovidio, 2014), corporate annual reports (e.g. Conway, O'Keefe, & Hrasky, 2015), organisational announcements (e.g. Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017), and corporate websites (e.g. Bansal & Kistruck, 2006). The plurality of data sources has added to the width of the existing literature.

More importantly, Goffman's (1959) conceptualisation of social interaction, which is considered as the antecedent of OIM (e.g. Bolino et al., 2008; Rettie, 2009; Solomon et al., 2013), remains still the theoretical foundation of many recent publications (e.g. Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2011; Solomon et al., 2013; Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014; Benthous, 2014; Tata & Prasad, 2015; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016; Benthous, Risius, & Beck, 2016; Zaharopoulos & Kwok, 2017; Bullock, 2018). Also, the existing studies have formulated a number of OIM strategies, among which Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo's (1999) taxonomy remains most extensively referenced (Bolino et al., 2008), especially by recent studies (e.g. Schniederjans, Cao,

& Schniederjans, 2013; Perks et al., 2013; Conway, O’Keefe, & Hrasky, 2015; Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015; Tata & Prasad, 2015; Windscheid et al., 2016; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016; Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017; Zaharopoulos & Kwok, 2017).

Although Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo’s (1999) taxonomy has been widely employed, it is indicated that new OIM strategies, that are specific to a given organisational context, can be developed. For instance, two new sets of OIM strategies, namely, ‘demonstrative’ and ‘illustrative’ strategies were developed by Bansal & Kistruck (2006) to justify energy corporations’ commitment to natural environment. Also, Sandberg & Holmlund (2015) proposed eight OIM strategies, among which four of them were associated with rhetorical style in the corporate sustainability reporting. This study provides insightful implications as it unveils how rhetoric devices can be orchestrated in a way that convey IM-oriented messages to relevant audiences (Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015), whilst the prior studies paid little attention to such a rhetorical facet that may induce tangible organizational outcomes if properly capitalized on. Furthermore, existing OIM strategies can be revamped to adapt to certain organisational contexts. For instance, Graffin, Haleblan, & Kiley (2016) introduced a new strategy named ‘impression offsetting’ by integrating the notion of anticipatory OIM strategies originally formulated in studies such as Elsbach, Sutton, & Principe (1988), with expectancy violation theory. Consequently, the existing literature shows that new strategies could be developed, and existing strategies could be readjusted to accommodate the complexity of organisational contexts. Overall, since the current chapter focuses on existing OIM studies, suggesting that new OIM strategies or new ways of using existing strategies can be developed to cater to different organisational contexts, it becomes important to

introduce how OIM is currently integrated with the focal organisational contexts in this study: SMEs and social media. The next chapter introduces the existing literature in relation to SMEs and social media, namely, the contexts in which OIM practice is understudied.

## **CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW (SMES & SOCIAL MEDIA)**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In *Chapter 2*, the existing literature pertaining to OIM is introduced. It is suggested that new strategies or new ways of using existing OIM strategies have been developed to accommodate different contexts (Bansal & Kistruck, 2006; Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015; Graffin, Haleblan, & Kiley, 2016). Thus, it becomes imperative to introduce the existing literature in relation to the focal organisational contexts in this research study – SMEs and social media.

This chapter is centred upon the existing literature regarding how OIM is implemented in the context of SMEs and social media. It is mainly classified into two sections: SMEs and social media. The first section is structured by firstly offering an overview incorporating SMEs' definitions and their contribution to the economy. Secondly, the characteristics of SMEs which fundamentally distinguish SMEs from large firms are elaborated. The following section examines how OIM fits in the context of SMEs and how the characteristics of SMEs influence the way OIM is exercised. The second section focuses on the existing literature regarding how social media adoption contributes to OIM enactment. Firstly, an overview is provided to map out social media's definitions, prevalent forms, and popularity. Secondly, prior literature pertaining to how social media is treated as an effective tool for organisational communications is elaborated. Moreover, an in-depth discussion over social media implementation within SMEs, featuring its motivations, benefits, and challenges, is provided. The final section evaluates empirical studies in relation to how OIM strategies are carried out on social media and hence address the deficits of the existing

literature. Finally, a chapter summary is offered to outline the research gaps identified in the review of the existing body of knowledge.

## **3.2 Literature in Relation to SMEs**

### **3.2.1 Overview**

Since 1970s, there has been a growing policy interest in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across Europe and in the UK (Deakins & Freel, 2012; Stokes & Wilson, 2006; Storey & Greene, 2010). For instance, European Commission re-launched the ‘Lisbon Strategy’ in 2005 with a greater emphasis on small firms (European Commission, 2010). Also, ‘think small first principle’ was proposed to help prosper the small firm sector in all business aspects (European Commission, 2010). In the UK, the department for business, enterprise, and regulatory reform (BERR) was established with the overall aim of optimizing the function of small firms in the society (BERR, 2008). In general, SMEs and entrepreneurship are widely acknowledged as a key source of dynamism, innovation, and flexibility in most advanced industrial countries (Storey & Greene, 2010; Stokes & Wilson, 2006).

SME is an elusive term as it has no uniform definition that precisely differentiates SMEs from large firms (Stokes & Wilson, 2006). The defining difficulties stem from the fact that SMEs generally do not comply with any neat parameters (Stokes & Wilson, 2006; Deakins & Freel, 2012). Put differently, SMEs are primarily characterized by the industry where they operate and the personal traits of individuals who run them (Stokes & Wilson, 2006; Deakins & Freel, 2012; Storey & Greene, 2010). Some definitions rely on numerical parameters in terms of headcount, turnover, and balance sheet value to distinguish between SMEs and large firms. For instance, the European Commission (2016) formulated a set of SME definitions (see **Table 10**

for details) that serves as the most up-to-date guide regarding how an enterprise can qualify as an SME.

**Table 10: SME Definitions (European Commission Version)**

| Category   | Content  | Definition/Explanation   |
|------------|--|--|
| Premise    | In order to qualify as an SME, one must first qualify as an Enterprise | An Enterprise is defined as any entity engaged in an economic activity, irrespective of its legal form |
| Criteria   | Headcount ( <b>H</b> )   | The number of Full-time, part-time, temporary and seasonal staff members                               |
|            | Annual Turnover ( <b>AT</b> )  | Annual Income with rebates deducted and indirect taxes (e.g. value added tax) excluded                 |
|            | Annual Balance Sheet Total ( <b>ABST</b> )                             | The value of an enterprise's main assets   |
| Thresholds | Medium   | <b>H</b> < 250   |
|            |  | <b>AT</b> < €50m   |
|            |  | Or<br><b>ABST</b> < €43m   |
|            | Small  | <b>H</b> < 50  |
|            |  | <b>AT</b> < €10m   |
|            |  | Or<br><b>ABST</b> < €10m   |
|            | Micro  | <b>H</b> < 10  |
|            |  | <b>AT</b> < €2m  |
|            |  | Or<br><b>ABST</b> < €2m  |

*Source: European Commission (2016)*

Such numeric-laden definitions have certain advantages. Firstly, they are comparatively simple to apply. Their ability to accommodate statistical analyses fuels the enactment of relevant policies. For instance, they are widely employed by European Union to determine whether a firm is eligible for certain types of grant or alternative assistance (Stokes & Wilson, 2006; Deakins & Freel, 2012; Storey & Greene, 2010). Also, in the UK, they are often referenced by regulatory bodies such as the Small Business Service (SBS) and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) (Deakins & Freel, 2012). Secondly, the definitions, along with further annotations, allow for little ambiguity for the demarcation between SMEs and larger firms and hence it is easy to apply in the field (Storey & Greene, 2010).

To conclude, although a firm's headcount is not always an accurate predictor for SME identification as it depends on the characteristics of the industry or business sector where the firm is established (Stokes & Wilson, 2006; Deakins & Freel, 2012), the



present study still employs European Commission's definition for reasons as follows:

1) it is arguably the most frequently referenced definition across Western European countries (Volery & Maazarol, 2015); and 2) its well-specified numerical parameters make it easy to gauge the research subjects and hence simplify the sampling process.

### **3.2.2 Significance of SMEs**

SMEs constitute an indispensable component of the economy due to their conspicuous contributions to economic growth and job creation (Acs & Mueller, 2008; Henrekson & Johansson, 2010; BPE, 2015; Deakins & Freel, 2012; Lampadarios, 2017). The most straightforward way to illustrate SME's significance is to look at the common measures of economic well-being. Since 1980s, there have been a substantial leap in the total number of firms in the UK, of which the majority have been small firms (Stokes & Wilson, 2006). In 2015, there were approximately 5.2 million SMEs which occupied 99.9% (among which small firms accounted for 99.3% and medium-sized accounted for 0.6%) of all private sector businesses in UK at the start of 2015. These SMEs, as a collective, accounted for 47% of private sector annual turnover (BPE, 2015). Further, SMEs accounted for 60% of private sector employment (BPE, 2015). It is suggested that SMEs' potential capacity for new job creation fuels the continuation of economic growth (Acs & Mueller, 2008; Henrekson & Johansson, 2010). More importantly, BPE reports published since 2010 have jointly indicated an ongoing trend towards an even broader base of small businesses, given the continuous volumetric shrinkage of large firms and escalated development of micro firms.

A widely held belief is that changes of political and economic landscape are the major reason behind the upsurge of interest in SMEs (Wennekers & Thurik, 1999; Stokes & Wilson, 2006; Deakins & Freel, 2012; Lampadarios, 2017). For instance, a robust structural shift in the economy away from manufacturing-based industries towards

services has largely facilitated the formation of the most dynamic economic sector (Curran, 1997; Stokes & Wilson, 2006). Provided their flexibility and responsiveness, many small ventures in this sector, such as those undertaking consultancies and advertising, have materialized their merits by offering non-normative, tailor-made services (Stokes & Wilson, 2006). Also, the development of new flexible manufacturing technologies has abated emphasis placed on economic scale (Deakins & Freel, 2012), as it has reduced the fixed costs of some manufacturing processes, catering for the production in smaller, more flexible units (Stokes & Wilson, 2006; Lampadarios, 2017).

### **3.2.3 Characteristics of SMEs: Small vs Large**

As is widely acknowledged, SMEs cannot be simply regarded as miniature large enterprises (Stokes & Wilson, 2006; Storey & Greene, 2010). There are a variety of fundamental differences between small and large firms (Volery & Mazzarol, 2015). This section elaborates the key characteristics of SMEs that profoundly differentiate them from their large brethren by respectively addressing external uncertainty, managerial style, innovation, and commitment to local communities.

#### **3.2.3.1 External Uncertainty**

SMEs constantly face uncertainty during their day-to-day operations and this is counselled by many as one of inherent differences that separate them from their scale-up counterparts (Storey & Greene, 2010; Deakins & Freel, 2012; Wynarczyk et al., 1993; Stokes & Wilson, 2006). Here, although uncertainty is commonly experienced by all types of business (Stokes & Wilson, 2006), it is argued that the uncertainty faced by SMEs is considerably greater than, and is fundamentally divergent from, that faced by large enterprises (Storey & Greene, 2010). In this respect, SMEs normally incur external uncertainty in relation to market conditions or customer demands, whereas

large businesses are more inclined to undergo internal uncertainty regarding deficiencies in organizational hierarchy (e.g. ineffective implementation of strategic decisions) (Storey & Greene, 2010).

One thing falls short for SMEs is their constrained access to market power (Stokes & Wilson, 2006; Storey & Greene, 2010). The lack of market power results in their compliance with the imposed price for their products/services, whereas large businesses often have the leverage in setting prices by withholding their supplies (Stokes & Wilson, 2006). Therefore, small ventures often seek to compete in alternative ways such as innovation and quality (Antunes, Quiros, & Justino, 2018; McAdam, 2000; Saridakis et al., 2008; Storey & Greene, 2010). SMEs may strive to deter such uncertainty by reducing their costs at every opportunity. Nevertheless, given the power of scale economies, large businesses, in many cases, are able to have lower costs and hence SMEs' efforts in cutting down costs are not sufficiently effective to even achieve short-term survival (Saridakis et al., 2008). Another way to respond to market uncertainty is to discover some form of niche. A niche refers to '*a small, restricted marketplace in which higher than average profits can be made to offer some form of specialist service or product*' (Storey & Greene, 2010: p. 5). A frequently spotted type of niche is associated with geographical advantage. For instance, in some local markets, SMEs are empowered to influence prices due to the absence of large competitors. Besides, Provision of specialist service such as extended working hours (e.g. midnight food delivery) is another form of niche. Nonetheless, niches for SMEs may only have short-term effects as entry barriers are low after above average profits are extracted, eliciting rival companies to enter the niche and diminish profit margins (Storey & Greene, 2010).

Provided the lack of market power, SMEs are often heavily dependent on their customers (Storey & Greene, 2010; Torres et al., 2012; Gras-Gil et al., 2016; Galbreath, 2017). As discussed above, price-settings for their products are beyond their control. Thus, it is barely predictable how many products small businesses can sell, or for what price. Consequently, regular customers (usually of a small number) are of great importance to SMEs' survival and growth (Storey & Greene, 2010; Galbreath, 2017). In this regard, these customers tend to exert influence in the production process by making particular demands and failures to meet their requirements may endanger customer loyalty (Van de Ven & Jeurissen, 2005; Du et al., 2007). Besides, despite some local loyalty, SMEs, unlike large businesses, almost generate no brand value at all (Shocker et al., 1994; Hatten & Schendel, 1977), and thus it is difficult for them to expand customer base. Such a disadvantage further increases uncertainty with respect to customers.

A second source of uncertainty is risk of failure (Honjo, 2000; Harhoff et al., 1998). Large enterprises often have higher tolerance for economic downturn induced by external shocks than SMEs do. With the capacity of scale economies (e.g. ability to withstand price competitions in a long run), large firms are empowered to mitigate certain failures. On the contrary, SMEs are more vulnerable to adverse conditions (Bamiatzi & Kirchmaier, 2014), and more likely to cease trading especially in their initial stages (Harhoff et al., 1998). Under such circumstances, small businesses often aim for short-term survival and expect a rapid growth in order to eschew failure risk (Honjo, 2000).

There is one side-effect of this uncertainty. Since the risk of failure is higher, external investors are often more selective about funding SMEs and this restrains sources of finance for SMEs (Ang, 1991; Jones, Macpherson, & Jayawarna, 2014). Coupled with

the information asymmetry (Ang, 1991), SMEs usually rely upon internal funds such as the owner's savings and retained profits (e.g. 'bootstrapping', see Jones & Jayawarna, 2010; Jones, Macpherson, & Jayawarna, 2014 for details). Although short-term loans from commercial banks are sometimes available in many regions, SMEs are required to pay higher interest rates than large firms are (Storey & Greene, 2010). In contrast, large enterprises tend to be more transparent in terms of information disclosure to relevant stakeholders (Ang, 1991; Saridakis et al., 2008), making viable a much wider choice of sources of finance. In addition, this side-effect also results in SMEs' reliance upon inter-organisational collaborations in an attempt to augment strengths and mitigate weaknesses (Muscio, 2007; Maskell & Malmberg, 1999; Waalkens et al., 2004) by sharing both tangible or intangible capabilities and resources (Bretherton & Chaston, 2005; Hamel & Doz, 1998; Jones, Macpherson, & Jayawarna, 2014). It is suggested that such inter-organisational collaborations are pivotal for SMEs' success in knowledge acquisition (Muscio, 2007), innovation (Nooteboom, 1994), and growth (Van Dijk et al., 1997).

### **3.2.3.2 Managerial Style**

SMEs and large corporations differ sharply in the managerial style associated with leadership, internal organization, and employee training and recruitment. Firstly, SMEs reportedly lack professionalism in their leadership or top management (Halme & Korpela, 2014; López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017). Here, professionalism is intimately associated with standards expected out of a given profession (Martimianakis, Maniate, & Hodges, 2009; Burford et al., 2014; Freidson, 2001). Such a lack of professionalism mainly results from the fact that SMEs are often owned and run by the same individual(s), namely, owner-managers (Cosh et al., 2005; Stokes & Wilson, 2006; Storey & Greene, 2010; Mazzarole, 2014). This is indicative that

incongruence of interests between owners and managers does not exist in most SMEs (Cosh et al., 2005). By contrast, it is far less likely to be the case in large corporations as private shareholders or financial institutions are usually the owners whilst professionals hired by them are held responsible for undertaking the management (Storey & Greene, 2010). As a result, it is clearly one of the deficits of such an owner-manager mode that SMEs lack the management team whose members respectively specialize in production, finance, personnel, marketing, and other integral parts of day-to-day operations (Halme & Korpela, 2014; Zeiller & Schauer, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In other words, as opposed to large firms where those determining the firm's long-term prospect and those implementing the strategy planned to secure such prospect are more likely to be mutually independent, owner-managers in SMEs are required to act as both planners and implementers (Cosh et al., 2005). In this case, although they rarely suffer the discrepancy between owners and managers in large firms (Cosh et al., 2005; Storey & Greene, 2010), SMEs are often faced with a dearth of functional knowhow and expertise in their top management team (Halme & Korpela, 2014; López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017; Stockdale et al., 2012).

More specifically, it is widely acknowledged that the centrality of owner-managers is one of the most noticeable features that separate SMEs from large corporations (Fleming, Lynch, & Kelliher, 2016; Reijonen & Komppula, 2007). Such centrality is notably represented by owner-managers' role in strategic decision making (SDM). As Gustafsson (2009: p. 293) contends, decisions in SMEs, unlike those in large corporations, are inclined to 'depart from the norms of rational decision-making theories'. Despite factors with regard to 'smallness' in scale including restricted human, financial, and technological resources, decisions being undertaken by owner-managers rather than teams with essential SDM skills and knowledge is the root cause

from which the problematic or inefficacious actions, processes, and behaviours of SDM stem (Huang & Wang, 2012). The centrality of owner-managers in SMEs, as argued by Brouthers et al. (1998: p. 132), is presumably due to the ‘difficult-to-dislodge’ entrepreneurial vision that initially propelled the establishment of the business, and hence the founder’s personal ideal is prioritised instead of rational SDM. Also, potential constraints on rational SDM typified by owner-managers’ sense of entitlement and their longing for autonomy (Gibcus, Vermeulen, & Radulova, 2008) are depicted as ‘bounded emotionality’, in which emotions of entrepreneurial demands hamper SDM in business operations, whereas in large firms, decisions are analysed and scrutinised (Jayasinghe, Thomas, & Wickramasinghe, 2008). Further, since attributions of owner-managers including personal background, experience, and education pose a significant impact on strategic awareness (Berry, 1998; Gibcus, Vermeulen, & Radulova, 2008), the uncertainty in relation to SDM intensifies, especially under the premise that expertise is often required (to tackle the complexity of decision-making), yet insufficient in the top management of SMEs (in stark contrast to that of large firms). Consequently, SDM biases and intuition-based judgements are often unavoidable in SMEs (Brouthers et al., 1998; Kort & Vermeulen, 2008; Huang & Wang, 2012).

Further, there exist other arenas where owner-managers exert significant authority on their ventures’ performance, which differentiate SMEs from their large counterparts. Firstly, in addition to owner-managers’ expertise, which was slightly touched upon in the above discussion, it appears that proper education or training received by owner-managers (or personnel in charge of SDM) remains a prerequisite for their businesses to gain competitive advantages (Gunasekaran et al., 2011; Karadag, 2017). In this case, owner-managers obtaining proper education, such as financial literacy (Delić,

Peterka, & Kurtović, 2016), technical knowhow (Boonsiritomachai, McGrath, & Burgess, 2016), and promotional skills (Fuller, 1994), is also deemed positively related to innovativeness (e.g. Hausman, 2005), strategic understanding (e.g. Von, 2005), and capital acquisition (e.g. Van Auken, 2001; Seghers, Manigart, & Vanacker, 2012) in SMEs. More importantly, owner-managers' attitude towards training and development (T&D) dictates the improvement of their employees' competency, since owner-managers, with the common notion that T&D solely concentrates on generic practices instead of firm-specific problems (Kitching & Blackburn, 2002), are normally reluctant to invest in T&D, as opposed to large corporations where T&D usually obtains adequate investments (Coetzer, Redmond, & Sharafizad, 2012). Besides, entrepreneurial competence acquired by owner-managers, which can be simply defined as the ability to envision, acknowledge, undertake, and materialise opportunities (Chandler & Jansen, 1992; Ng & Kee, 2018), is also regarded indispensable for SMEs to gain tangible returns (Rahman et al., 2015; Letonja et al., 2016; Ng & Kee, 2018) and cultivate innovativeness (Mohsin et al., 2017; Pretorius et al., 2005). Finally, it is extensively pinpointed that owner-managers are required to nurture and solidify effective relationships with key stakeholders (Fleming et al., 2016), considering the vitality of customer loyalty for SMEs (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007). An additional benefit for SMEs' founders to build rapport with key stakeholders is capitalising on the strategic, technical, and relational knowhow shared by partners (i.e. exploiting their industrial network contacts as in updating information, mitigating uncertainty, and promoting products/services, see Gilmore et al., 2000 for details) to optimise their firms' profitability (Casidya & Nyadzayob, 2017). Overall, Given the centrality of owner-managers' role in SMEs, coupled with all the limitations



they are confronted (i.e. things discussed above), it is considerably more challenging for small-scale ventures than large firms to prosper sustainably.

Secondly, Curran & Blackburn (2001) suggest that the internal organization within SMEs is informal, whereas large businesses commonly uphold a procedural system that enables decisions made by the top management to be communicated and implemented in full throughout the whole of the firm. It is rather understandable that SMEs, where verbal notifications can often be effective as information circulates rapidly within a small scope, have no stimuli to document decisions and communicate them in writing (Curran & Blackburn, 2001). This also explicates why large corporations in many cases suffer ‘internal uncertainty’, of which the primary manifestation is the inconsistency in intra-organizational communications (Storey & Greene, 2010).

Finally, given the fact that SMEs usually suffer a lack of qualified employees (Doern, 2009; O’Dwyer, Gilmore, & Carson, 2009), and a comparatively low budget which handicaps their sustainability and expansion (Xu, Rohatgi, and Duan 2007), the provision of formal training is less present in SMEs than in large companies (Carroll et al., 1999; Storey, 2005; Zeiller & Schauer, 2011; Ahmad et al., 2017). Also, the recruitment of staff in SMEs is largely dependent upon informal channels (e.g. owner-managers’ social networks), whilst large companies often adopt a procedural recruitment process (e.g. multistage interviews) (Carroll et al., 1999).

### **3.2.3.3 Innovation**

Since SMEs can barely reap scale economies, it becomes evident that they are more likely to exploit new products/services (Man et al., 2002; Rangone, 1999). In response to the lack of market power and resources, they are highly motivated to commercialise

innovations (Van Praag & Versloot, 2007; Thomas et al., 2004; Mohsin et al., 2017). Even many novel ideas they have discovered fail to materialize due to their lack of funds to finance preliminary research and further development for innovation, SMEs still seek to pioneer the development of new markets or industries so as to attain their survival (Van Praag & Versloot, 2007; Storey & Greene, 2010; Thomas et al., 2004). On the contrary, innovation in large firms often entails higher expenditure on formal research to secure that such innovation is highly viable and profitable in a long run (Storey & Greene, 2010; Mohsin et al., 2017). In addition, the fact that SMEs are largely devoted to innovation also results in their being strategically flexible and adaptable to the changing environment (Man et al., 2002), as they can easily shift their focus onto specific segments of a market (Mosakowski, 1993; Pelham, 2000; Durand & Coeurderoy, 2001). Overall, SMEs' strong interest in innovation or creativity can be exemplified by the fact that the creative industries in the UK are populated by a large number of SMEs and only a few large companies (DCMS, 2001; Chaston, 2008; Dyer-Witthford & dePeuter, 2009; Nesta, 2017).

#### **3.2.3.4 Commitment to Local Communities**

The final characteristic of SMEs mainly refers to their commitment to the well-being of the surrounding society or local communities (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017; Orlitzky et al., 2011; Galbreath, 2017). Such commitment to the locality stems from the fact that SMEs often acquire resources (e.g. volunteers) from the local communities and hence they are required to serve the locals (e.g. host events for the locals) in return (Sen & Cowley, 2013). Also, certain SMEs often rely on funds from Government institutions (e.g. The Arts Council) and one of the criteria for them to be granted the funds is providing pro-social services (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017; Sen & Cowley, 2013). Under this premise, this type of social responsibility

facilitates information exchange and long-term collaboration, in which case a rapport between SMEs and their surrounding communities is established (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017). Moreover, such rapport is able to gradually positivize the attitudes towards the SMEs' products (e.g. perceived quality of a play) and eventually solidify customer loyalty (Van de Ven & Jeurissen, 2005; Du et al., 2007; Torres et al., 2012; Gras-Gil et al., 2016; Galbreath, 2017). On the contrary, large firms normally uphold no close ties to local communities (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017), due to the facts that large firms are not motivated to maintain the same level of intimacy between their personnel and their local communities (i.e. SMEs organise more face-to-face events to communicate with the locals) (Sen & Cowley, 2013; López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017). As a result, retaining close ties with local communities remains a noticeable feature for many SMEs.

#### **3.2.4 SMEs and Entrepreneurship: From an OIM Perspective**

Various prior studies regarding OIM enactment in SMEs have derived from an entrepreneurial perspective (e.g. Benson et al., 2015; Yusuf, 2011; Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014; Tang, Khan, & Zhu, 2012). As Stokes & Wilson (2006) indicated, the small business sector is characterized by the activities undertaken by owner-managers of small firms, who, in most cases, are referred to as entrepreneurs. Also, Deakins & Freel (2012) articulated that entrepreneurship and SMEs are frequently conflated in scholarly investigations of multiple organizational outcomes, although these two constructs are not completely interchangeable. Besides, the following studies were thoroughly examined and they showed no clear evidence that all the ventures in question were in any reference to large firms.

OIM application with SMEs/entrepreneurship settings remains understudied. Empirical studies of a drastically limited number have primarily embarked on the

conjunction between individual behaviours and organizational outcomes (e.g. Yusuf, 2011; Nagy et al., 2012; Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014; Wu & Ma, 2018; Thompson-Whiteside, Turnbull, & Howe-Walsh, 2018; Balen, Tarakci, & Sood, 2019; Benson et al., 2015; Tang, Khan, & Zhu, 2012; Kibler et al., 2017; Shepherd & Haynie, 2011). To be specific, most studies within this realm have prioritized the role of entrepreneurs as the organisational representatives of their new ventures and have ascertained that the individual-level IM endeavours they have made exert an impact on key stakeholders (e.g. entrepreneurs' charisma, see Yusuf, 2011 for details). Put differently, individual behaviours of organisational representatives (e.g. entrepreneurs' verbal accounts) are empowered to influence organizational outcomes (e.g. external funding). Such empowerment stems from the superiority of entrepreneurs' role in their businesses, given the distinctive structural and decision-making hierarchy in SMEs (Cosh et al., 2005; Stokes & Wilson, 2006; Storey & Greene, 2010; Mazzarole, 2014), which has been elaborated in *Section 3.2.3.2*. This often occurs when the start-ups strive to gain legitimacy, one notable manifestation of which, is resource acquisition that is pivotal to their initial survival (e.g. Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014), rationalize potentially suspect conducts in response to external scrutiny (e.g. Benson et al., 2015), or moderate self-views following venture failure (e.g. Shepherd & Haynie, 2011). These three streams of literature will be elaborated below.

#### **3.2.4.1 Legitimacy Acquisition**

In an attempt to attain legitimacy for new ventures, IM strategies have been exercised by entrepreneurs to cater to the demands of key stakeholders (Yusuf, 2011; Nagy et al., 2012; Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014; Wu & Ma, 2018; Thompson-Whiteside, Turnbull, & Howe-Walsh, 2018; Balen, Tarakci, & Sood, 2019). For instance, Yusuf

(2011), building upon a dramaturgical approach, informed that IM was pervasively used by entrepreneurs in their business presentations to project charisma to external investors. In this case, the demonstration of charisma consolidated by IM performance, was intended to maximize the persuasiveness, dependent on which the legitimacy of the nascent business was gauged by external investors (Yusuf, 2011). Provided the information asymmetry of SMEs (Ang, 1991; Storey & Greene, 2010) (e.g. less transparency compared with large companies), IM was believed to be effective in increasing the likelihood of securing external funding and helping forge the charismatic relationship between entrepreneurs and external funders (Yusuf, 2011). Also, it is noteworthy that the IM strategies developed in this study such as *framing* and *scripting*, mainly aided entrepreneurs' rhetoric crafting (Yusuf, 2011; Benford & Hunt, 1992). In business presentations, such rhetoric crafting is purely individual-centric in terms of the presenter (i.e. entrepreneurs) who initiates and enacts IM and the dramaturgical nature of IM strategies (i.e. behaviours of human beings) with which the presenter is equipped (Yusuf, 2011). Besides, the scholar made no substantive attempt to tease out how entrepreneurs' personal charisma echoed the grander strategic moves of their ventures from an organizational perspective.

Another piece of research, conducted by Parhankangas & Ehrlich (2014), ascertained that OIM strategies tended to moderate the relationship between entrepreneurs and business angels. Specifically, such relationship was non-linear as either inadequate or excessive utility of assertive OIM strategies featuring *organizational promotion* yielded optimal results in the quest for funding (Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014). Further, drawing upon the analysis of 595 investment applications, the researchers affirmed that the particular strategy '*organizational promotion*' ought to prioritize certain novelty in business concepts or products in order for new ventures to be

perceived by business angels in a favourable light (Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014). Meanwhile, a high level of compliance with prevailing values in society (i.e. ‘opinion conformity’ as one salient sub-form of ‘ingratiation’), most notably the ability to collaborate with or satisfy a wide range of stakeholders, was deemed pivotal to initial-stage fundraising (Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014). Moreover, moderate usage of *supplication* and *blasting* were also regarded as effective in respectively spawning sympathy for novice businesses and undesirability towards their rivals (Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014). Finally, entrepreneurs’ language use (i.e. choice of words and tone of narratives), although not given equal weight as the content, was found durably influential throughout the course of investment applications and such influence peaked when written applications were being decided whether they could qualify for further face-to-face presentations (Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014). Overall, this study offers significant implications for future research including 1) not all OIM strategies contribute uniformly to entrepreneurs’ fundraising endeavours; 2) an established OIM strategy can be viewed as an assemblage of sub-strategies (e.g. *ingratiation* incorporates *opinion conformity*, *favour-rendering*, and *flattery*), each of which has a differentiated effect on certain groups of stakeholders; and 3) the implementation of OIM strategies entails both what is presented (e.g. verbal cues intended to highlight certain traits) and how it is presented (e.g. frequency of mentioning those IM-laden cues).

Also, Nagy et al. (2012) tested how entrepreneurs’ credentials and IM behaviours were perceived by external funders. An experiment was conducted based on a sample of 90 investment and finance professionals (Nagy et al., 2012). These participants were asked to review and evaluate 1) a vignette and a résumé of each entrepreneur in question; and 2) a short video of the entrepreneur introducing his/her new venture

(Nagy et al., 2012). As analogous to Yusuf (2011), this empirical study was also carried out through an individual lens. The findings suggested that entrepreneurs IM behaviours, namely *self-promotion*, *exemplification*, and *ingratiation*, had an impact on the perceived cognitive legitimacy of new ventures (Nagy et al., 2012). Besides, the perceived cognitive legitimacy assessed in the experiment tended to exhibit a ‘threshold effect’ that the impact of IM behaviours on entrepreneurs’ credentials vastly diminished when it surpassed a certain threshold (Nagy et al, 2012; Rutherford & Buller, 2007). Such findings also bolstered the preceding work reporting a non-linear relationship between IM efforts and perceived legitimacy.

Further, a two-year inductive field study was carried out by Wu & Ma (2018) with the purpose of understanding how returnee entrepreneurs’ overseas experiences influenced the legitimisation of their new ventures. This study incorporated in-depth interviews from the perspective of both returnee entrepreneurs in search of venture capitals and protentional funders, drawing upon IM theories (Wu & Ma, 2018). The novelty of the findings was mainly associated with the positive relationship between returnee entrepreneurs’ IM-oriented strategic presentation of their overseas work experiences and global social networks and the likelihood of acquiring resources to fuel their start-ups (Wu & Ma, 2018). In other words, the perceived perception of potential capital holders was rendered positive when IM strategies such as symbolic actions were employed to portray the entrepreneurs’ overseas credentials and qualifications (Wu & Ma, 2018). However, the findings are subject to the context of emerging markets (e.g. China), meaning that whether such findings could be generalised to the context of developed economies remains debatable.

In a similar vein, drawing upon IM and entrepreneurial marketing theories, Thompson-Whiteside, Turnbull, & Howe-Walsh (2018) examined how female

entrepreneurs promoted their new ventures to gain legitimacy. An interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was adopted, which featured semi-structured interviews of 11 key informants (Thompson-Whiteside, Turnbull, & Howe-Walsh, 2018). From an individual perspective, four IM strategies including *experimental*, *risk*, *authenticity* and *supplication*, were synthesised to extend the existing knowledge with regard to female entrepreneurs' self-promotional endeavours in legitimising their ventures (Thompson-Whiteside, Turnbull, & Howe-Walsh, 2018). It is noteworthy that *supplication*, which featured the articulation of personal fears and weaknesses, was an essential element for female entrepreneurs if they desired to shape a 'authentic' persona in the eyes of key stakeholders and hence avoid unjust scepticisms on their competency (Thompson-Whiteside, Turnbull, & Howe-Walsh, 2018). Nevertheless, this study lacks the perspective of key stakeholders to see whether insights shared by the recipients of the identified IM strategies validate or contradict the current findings.

Finally, Balen, Tarakci, & Sood (2019) explored the negativity of visions articulated by entrepreneurs in acquiring funding for their ventures. Such visions were referred to as 'disruptive visions', as they were rooted in intentions of disarranging the incumbent organisations, market, and ecosystem (Balen, Tarakci, & Sood, 2019). Building upon IM theories, a set of hypotheses were proposed and tested based on the data gathered from 918 start-ups. The results yielded from the field study and corroborated by a randomised online experiment suggested that articulating a disruptive vision, using IM strategies, enhanced the odds of obtaining funding, but reduced the amount of funding obtained (Balen, Tarakci, & Sood, 2019).

#### **3.2.4.2 Rationalization of (Potential) Misconducts**

IM has also been enacted by entrepreneurs to justify plausible disputes regarding the development of their nascent ventures (Tang, Khan, & Zhu, 2012; Benson et al., 2015;



Kibler et al., 2017). For instance, Tang, Khan, & Zhu (2012) found that assertive IM strategies delved in this case effectively mitigated the perceived negativity of entrepreneurs' ethically suspect behaviours with regard to information acquisition. In this study, the scale adopted to gauge entrepreneurs' IM enactment derived from Bolino & Turnley's (1999) pioneering work that was initially designed to quantify employees' behaviours in occasions where they strived to shape impressions their superiors formed of them (Tang, Khan, & Zhu, 2012). However, unlike the original scale, only two assertive IM strategies (i.e. *self-promotion* and *ingratiation*) were measured and consequently the influence of alternatives on entrepreneurs' unethical conducts remained uncharted. Although the researchers justified their modification of the scale as highly applicable to the entrepreneurial and geographical contexts (i.e. china), they failed to address in detail how the selection of IM strategies fitted into the alleged contexts.

Moreover, a later study explored how entrepreneurs 'camouflaged' the governance documents of their ventures for initial public offering (IPO) in response to external scrutiny (Benson et al., 2015). In this scenario, 'camouflage' was defined by the readability and 'understandability' of the governance documents. When camouflage intensifies, the documents in question become less readable or understandable. More importantly, camouflage was deemed as a duo-dimensional concept since it embodied both the overall tone and obfuscation embedded in sentence construction of the documents (Benson et al., 2015). The findings indicated that the governance provisions were less likely camouflaged whilst analyst coverage was high. Further, the utility of camouflage was empirically affirmed as effective in incurring tangible returns (i.e. IPOs with more camouflaged governance were granted more funds and imposed less under-pricing than others).

In addition, a more recent publication assessed the efficacy of IM strategies employed by entrepreneurs in order to restore social legitimacy in the wake of venture failures (Kibler et al., 2017). Building upon attribution theory, a conjoint experiment was conducted to investigate how the general public's legitimacy judgements altered in response to a series of attributions of causes of venture failures. In this study, IM-related accounts that attributed venture failures to uncontrollable external factors (i.e. the condition that fostered such factors was unlikely to recur) were deemed as most efficacious for entrepreneurs to reverse the general public's evaluation of their legitimacy (Kibler et al., 2017).

#### **3.2.4.3 Moderation of Entrepreneurs' Self-Views**

This stream of literature sheds light on entrepreneurial IM operationalized to manage negative attributions associated with venture failure (e.g. Shepherd & Haynie, 2011). One prominent study within this research realm was proposed by Shepherd & Haynie (2011). In this study, the relationship between entrepreneurs' psychological well-being and undesirable organizational goals was delved building on literature with respect to venture failure, self-verification, self-determination, and IM (Shepherd & Haynie, 2011). The synthesis of the aforementioned literature and further inferences based on the synthesis, jointly formulated a theoretical framework to offer plausible explanations why entrepreneurs stigmatized by venture failures, namely bankruptcy in this case, sought to adjust their self-views in conformity with how others perceived them (Shepherd & Haynie, 2011). Such a framework exhibits a paradox where IM strategies are employed to 1) maintain positive self-views so as to allay self-doubts inflicted by the stigma following bankruptcy; and 2) verify negative self-views to obtain psychological coherence between how entrepreneurs view themselves and how others perceive them (Shepherd & Haynie, 2011). Specifically, the former responds

to venture failures positively often with '*heightened motivation to succeed*', whereas the latter responds more negatively with '*feelings of dejection and loss of motivation*' (Johnson, Vincent, & Ross, 1997: p. 385). According to the authors, it is intriguing that certain IM strategies help strengthen both positive and negative self-views (Shepherd & Haynie, 2011). For instance, the pervasive adoption of *denials* (i.e. strategy of denying responsibility in this case) helps stigmatized entrepreneurs, who hold a positive self-view after delivering poor performances, to escape external accusations, thus alleviating the escalation of critiques from firm stakeholders and minimising further damage to their self-esteem (Boeker, 1992). Meanwhile, those who perceive negatively about themselves following failures are inclined to exercise *supplication*, in this case signalling entrepreneurs' behaviours to demonstrate their own weaknesses, yet with the purpose of lowering others' impressions (Swann and Ely, 1984; Shepherd & Haynie, 2011), rather than soliciting support from others (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). To sum up, this study, unlike the preceding ones, is purely theoretical. Thus, the viability of the findings remains untested. For instance, it is evident that not all the propositions presented are endorsed by previous empirical studies. Also, some of the literature addressed as the theoretical evidence has concentrated on social psychological aspects of individuals in general rather than those of entrepreneurs. As a result, it calls for future research to test the hypotheses proposed in this study.

It is worth highlighting that there are a number of recent publications shedding light on IM application in entrepreneurial contexts. These papers are either constructed in a way that IM remains only one of the many building blocks of the focal phenomena (e.g. Hossfeld, 2018; Gao, Yu, & Cannella Jr., 2016), or beyond any of the aforementioned three streams (e.g. Huang, Wang, & Yao, 2018; Gleasure, 2015).

Thus, although they are not specified in details, these papers still deserve to be mentioned for further reading, if need be.

To sum up, the existing literature inquiring OIM practice in the context of SMEs is limited as the bulk of the prior studies were either conducted within large firm settings, or associated with individual-level IM enacted by entrepreneurs to legitimise their new ventures. Thus, the next section will elaborate the extant literature regarding social media as the other context of this research study.

### **3.3 Literature in Relation to Social Media**

#### **3.3.1 Overview**

Over the last decade, there has been a hype surrounding social media and such a hype, coupled with a growing scholarly interest, has made social media a renowned channel for communicating information (Shi et al., 2014; Aral et al., 2013). From an organizational perspective, companies are constantly using social media as a way to establish, sustain, and justify their images in the eyes of key stakeholders (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013). As warranting theory suggests, social media users' comments on corporate social media homepages seem to represent a warrant that is spontaneously initiated and not tightly controllable. For instance, complimentary comments provided by customers are likely to steer public impressions positively whereas critical comments are prone to provoking negative perceptions of others. In this regard, social media has made organizations vulnerable to those explicit and instant criticisms (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011; Veil, Sellnow, & Petrun, 2012). Under such a circumstance, organizations may intensify OIM to minimise the dilution of their control over the projected images (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011; Veil, Sellnow, & Petrun, 2012).

Prior to the extensive social media adoption with organizational settings, preceding OIM literature discussed in *Chapter 2* is centralized at offline information outlets such as annual reports, corporate stories, and specialized organizational programmes (e.g. Elsbach & Sutton, 1998; Spear & Roper, 2013), to link up with both internal and external stakeholders, who are held pivotal to an organization's business performance (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Nevertheless, the emergence of social media has revolutionized the way organizations manage relations and perceptions of key audiences.

Social media has been defined in various ways. For instance, Mayfield (2008) delineated social media as an assemblage of internet-based media which fundamentally facilitates interactive communications among users. Alternatively, Kietzmann et al. (2011: p.241) conceptualized social media as Web platforms '*via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content*'. Also, Cook (2008) underpinned that the content of information circulated on social media has been democratised and digitalized, whilst users have been empowered to not only receive and disseminate, but also generate and share such information amongst themselves. Further, social media was believed to fuel decentralized user level content, social interaction, and public membership (Abraham, 2012; Li & Shiu, 2012). These definitions have some shared grounds that collectively differentiate social media from conventional media: 1) online; 2) interactive; 3) user-generated; and 4) many-to-many communication approach. Therefore, social media refers to a wide range of Web-based media platforms which promote highly interactive user-initiated communications through a many-to-many approach (Mayfield, 2008; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Cook, 2008; Abraham, 2012; Li & Shiu, 2012). According to the above-mentioned definition, social media embodies a wide range of forms

including blogs, wikis, forums, podcasts, chat rooms, social networking sites (SNSs), video-sharing sites, and microblogs (Cook, 2008). Among these forms, SNSs (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest), video-sharing sites (e.g. YouTube), and microblogs (e.g. Twitter) are most popular worldwide (Kemp, 2015).

The past decade has witnessed a rapid growth of its usage for communication, networking, and information access (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). According to Kemp (2015), there were approximately 2.078 billion active social media user accounts worldwide in 2014 which accounted for 29% of the total population. Users of such a considerable number spent averagely 2.4 hours on social media on a daily basis (Kemp, 2015).

### **3.3.2 Social Media as a Tool for Organisational Communication**

Social media has revolutionized the way organizations interact with their target audiences. Firstly, most social media outlets offer a lucrative opportunity for organizations to disseminate large-scale information to diversified populations (Li & Shiu, 2012). For instance, SNSs, such as Facebook, which are highly scalable and accessible, spurs an extensive sharing of information regarding organizations and their products/services, functionalizing a word-of-mouth effect among existing and potential customers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In addition to being exposed to intensified promotion of products/services, customers are often emboldened to engage in viral communities where they gain access to extended information, which is commonly unavailable in alternative ways, such as social networks (Kane et al., 2014; Boyd & Ellison, 2007), location-based recommendations (Zhao & Lu, 2012), user reviews (Li & Shiu, 2012), linkages to certain types of content such as blog posts (Treem & Leonardi, 2012), and numerous other services of enhanced availability (Park et al., 2010; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Moreover, information exchange on such a large

scale, which is functionalised by social media, can reinforce the word of mouth effect (i.e. information exchange through interpersonal communication, see Dellarocas, 2006 for details) and attitudinal loyalty of social media followers (i.e. a user's commitment towards a company, see Benthaus, Risius, & Beck, 2016; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001 for details). Word of mouth effect is reinforced as 1) social media enhances users' ability to connect with each other (i.e. increase the volume of their social networks) (Libai et al., 2013); and 2) organisations are empowered to regulate user-generated content (i.e. to manage the tonality of content such as displaying positive comments and deleting negative comments) (Trusov et al., 2009). Attitudinal loyalty is enhanced because shared information circulates rapidly on social media and loyal users (i.e. social media followers) are more committed to sharing information pertaining to the company (Clark and Melancon, 2013). In addition, organizations are also encouraged to collect information in relation to customers including purchasing preferences, social influence, and social interaction (Li & Shiu, 2012). Besides, customer feedback, news articles, and product reviews are also accessible in ways which are facilitated by social media such as news feeds, digital commentaries, product ratings, and blog posts (Castellanos et al., 2012). Hence, such digitized two-way information flows enabled by social media exercise a significant impact on both organizations and customers (Benthaus, Risius, & Beck, 2016). Such an impact is even amplified once the exchanged information contains critiques or less desirable opinions about particular firms and their products/services (Kimmel, 2010). Therefore, it becomes imperative for corporations to professionalize their social media engagement by applying proper analytics (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011; Larson & Watson, 2011). Here, social media analytics are a group of computational metrics that assist the assessment of the audience's interaction with an organisation's social media

postings (Ardley & Brooke, 2014). Such analytics primarily take the form of statistics pertaining to likes, shares, and clicks – engagement figures functionalised by social media (e.g. Facebook Insights). Such analytics are mainly employed by firms to monitor user activities on social media and in doing so customer feedback can be filtered and recorded for further improvements of their products/services (Larson & Watson, 2011; Guha, Paul, & Soutar, 2018). Moreover, social media may outperform conventional feedback-seeking efforts in terms of expenditure on research and development, since it captures customers' needs in a simpler manner (Dong & Wu, 2015; Parent et al., 2011). As a consequence, provided the fact that social media analytics are readily available (i.e. it demands no complex skills) (Askool & Nakata, 2011), and affordable (i.e. low cost) (Harrigan & Miles, 2014), they are deemed as a cost-effective tool for organisations to consolidate their customer engagement online (Eid & EI-Gohary, 2013; Guha, Paul, & Soutar, 2018).

Many have acknowledged social media's role in boosting communications between organizations and stakeholders (e.g. Stelzner, 2012; Hoehle, Scornavacca, & Huff, 2012; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Young, 2010). Firstly, Wang, Pauleen, & Zhang (2016), drawing upon media synchronicity theory (MST), implied that social media exercises a significant impact on communication performance. In specific, five media capabilities suggested by MST, namely, transmission velocity (i.e. the speed of information transmission), parallelism (i.e. the number of conversations a medium accommodates concurrently), symbol sets (i.e. the number of ways information can be encoded for communication), rehearsability (i.e. the degree to which senders are allowed to rehearse before information transmission), and reprocessability (i.e. the degree to which a message can be revisited or reprocessed during or after information transmission) (Dennis et al., 2008; Wang, Pauleen, & Zhang, 2016), are optimized



with social media settings. Provided its characteristics discussed above, social media evidently upholds robust media capabilities and hence greatly enhances communication performance (Wang, Pauleen, & Zhang, 2016). Secondly, Stelzner (2012) identified that over 80% of practitioners co-hold a strong belief on social media's contribution to creating effective exposure for their organizations. Further, Zhao & Lu (2012) also found that organization-stakeholder interactions via social media effectively elevate users' satisfaction. Moreover, social media has long set a strong foothold in banking industry where security is the top priority (Hoehle, Scornavacca, & Huff, 2012). Finally, a wide range of industries including hospitality, tourism, and service industries, have also been recognised as the fertile grounds for social media application (Young, 2010; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Within these industries, social media has been capitalized on by firms as an integral part of their online strategies (Hoehle, Scornavacca, & Huff, 2012; Young, 2010; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

### **3.3.3 Social Media Application in SMEs**

Social media has been a common practice in SMEs (Chen et al., 2008; Ainin et al., 2015; Atanassova & Clark, 2015). Social media adoption is anchored in a variety of organizational objectives including communication (Lee & Kozar, 2012), market research and branding (Congxi et al., 2010), innovation (Chesbrough, Vanhaverbeke, & West, 2006; Wamba & Carter, 2014), advertising via social networks (Beloff and Pandya, 2010; Handayani and Lisdianingrum, 2012), driving cultural change (Bhanot, 2012), organizational learning (Hamburg, 2012), knowledge sharing (Razmerita & Kirchner, 2011; Panahi, Watson, & Partridge, 2012), and managing customer relations (Harrigan, 2013; Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014; Harrigan & Miles, 2014). Among these objectives, social media has been most frequently implemented as a key

mechanism to proactively interact with customers and upgrade internal communications and collaborations (Meske & Stieglitz, 2013). Overall, SMEs, as ascertained by many, have benefited from their social media implementations since such a powerful technique may exert an impact on their business operations (Barnes et al., 2012; Nakara, Benmoussa, & Jaouen, 2012; Atansassova & Clark, 2015; Öztamur & Karakadılar, 2014; Stokes & Nelson, 2013). As a consequence, it becomes imperative to understand how to optimize social media adoption in such a well-delimited context, taking into account the distinctive characteristics of SMEs that sharply differentiate them from large firms.

#### **3.3.3.1 Motivations**

Social media adoption in SMEs is motivated in broad terms by the intent to optimise the effectiveness and efficiency of operational performance (Zeiller & Schauer, 2011). More importantly, this generic intent embodies a series of particular motives. Firstly, McCann & Barlow (2015) contends that increasing firm awareness and expand follower base is considered as the top priority for SMEs to integrate social media with their business practices. In other words, word-of-mouth retains a long-lasting effect and hence more efficaciously attracts new customers than conventional forms of promotional channels (i.e. the referrals are explicitly connected with new followers on social media) (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauweis, 2009). For example, Stelzner (2013) reported that 89% of the surveyed marketers acknowledged an increase of the publicity of their companies with social media presence and 75% recognised an increase of the traffic directed to their companies' official websites by social media. Secondly, social media affords the opportunity for SMEs to intensify (e.g. two-way communications for obtaining feedback, see Kietzmann et al., 2012 for details) and customise (e.g. tailor-made responses for enabling better perceptions of responsiveness) the

interaction with their stakeholders (Brodie et al., 2007; Michaelidou et al., 2011; Ainin et al., 2015; Odoom, Anning-Dorson, & Acheampong, 2017) and hence deepens and transforms the bilateral relationships (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014; McCann & Barlow, 2015; Tench & Jones, 2015). Thirdly, effective social media adoption is thought to enhance business performance such as increasing sales and creating repeated sales (Jones et al., 2015; McCann & Barlow, 2015). Further, another compelling finding regarding what originally drives SMEs to initiate their social media adoptions indicates that SMEs' interest in social media has mainly been sparked by the combination of curiosity and ignorance about such an advanced communicational technology (i.e. attempts to experiment with social media) (McCann & Barlow, 2015). In a similar vein, Durkin (2013) found no clear evidence of purposive or thoughtful social media adoption in SMEs and he attributes such unpurposive social media adoption to the owner-managers' anxiety of being disadvantaged if their ventures are not equipped with this new essential tool. This congruence between objectives of commencing and furthering social media implementation presumably hints that SMEs had little knowledge regarding the benefits of social media before its tangible returns are detected.

### **3.3.3.2 Benefits**

There are certain benefits pertaining to social media adoption with SME settings. Firstly, social media normally requires no sign-up fees and can be managed by non-experts (people with merely primitive internet surfing skills) (Askool & Nakata, 2011; Harrigan & Miles, 2014). Also, it is compatible with the infrastructure of most SMEs (e.g. many social media applications can even be installed and used on a mobile) (Ainin et al., 2015). Hence, owner-managers are no longer required to invest heavily on feedback-seeking and instead they currently strive to stay updated of a large volume

of feedback gathered from multiple social media platforms (Day, 2013; Harrigan & Miles, 2014). Since managing social media necessitates no complex regulatory regime, it is perfectly suited to the informal, occasionally sluggish management and internal organization of SMEs (Barnes et al., 2012). Overall, social media is able to simultaneously improve productivity (e.g. collection of feedback) and cut down expenses (Larson & Watson, 2011; Guha, Paul, & Soutar, 2018).

Secondly, customized responses can be provided instantly through social media to cater to specific requests of customers (Hinchcliffe, 2010; Sparks, So, & Bradley, 2016). Such customisation reportedly reinforces customer service and relations (Ainin et al., 2015) and eventually improves business performance (Wang et al., 2016). Further, certain types of content facilitated by social media can help enhance the engagement between SMEs and their target audiences online (Williams & Chinn, 2010; Fisher, 2009). These posts can be typified by behind-the-scene (BTS) content, which normally features team building content (i.e. demonstration of synergy between team members), progress content (i.e. demonstration of what has been improved), funny content (i.e. demonstration of humour), and personalised content (i.e. non-business details) (Flightmedia, 2018). Such BTS content is believed to enable SMEs to build rapport and long-term relationships with their social media audiences (Williams & Chinn, 2010; Fisher, 2009), since it galvanises social media audiences into deeper engagement with the company such as liking, sharing, and commenting (Flightmedia, 2018; Williams & Chinn, 2010).

Existing literature has documented several other benefits of social media adoption for SMEs. Firstly, social media is extensively treated as an effective performance indicator (e.g. Ye et al., 2009; Luo et al., 2013; Whiting, Hansen, & Sen, 2017; Michaelidou et al., 2011; Wamba & Carter, 2014; McCann & Barlow, 2015; Odoom,

Anning-Dorson, & Acheampong, 2017). For instance, Ye et al. (2009) identified that online customer reviews exerted a significant impact on business performance of small hotels, whilst Luo et al. (2013) observed a positive relationship between social media analytics (e.g. customer ratings) and firm equity values. Further, social media also enables SMEs to acquire market intelligence by means of collecting information of key stakeholders especially competitors (e.g. monitor the social media activities of competitors) (Atanassova & Clark, 2015). Studies also indicate that such acquisition of market intelligence reinforces the innovation outcomes of SMEs (He et al., 2015; Scuotto et al., 2016; Atanassova & Clark, 2015). Moreover, SMEs are empowered by social media to reach out to an international audience (Shaltoni et al., 2018) or access to global markets (Bell & Loane, 2010). Finally, online endorsement becoming available through social media, featuring ‘high-profile’ customers, namely, ‘opinion leaders’, helping to convince new customers and convert users, even bystanders to new followers, was found to improve SMEs’ credibility and render positive their reputation (Helm & Salminen, 2010).

#### **3.3.3.3 Challenges**

Although social media allows for integration between enriched resources (e.g. customer reviews on social media), alongside developed capabilities (e.g. direct and instant contact with customers) and extant organizational practices (Hamburg & Hall, 2009; Hamburg, 2012), SMEs still face many challenges. First of all, social media adoption in many SMEs has limited effects and is mostly treated as a digitised medium for distributing public-facing materials (McCann & Barlow, 2015). In doing so, future customer engagement might be hampered (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Thus, having a clear strategic plan of social media usage is deemed as a prerequisite for SMEs to encourage discourses (McCann & Barlow, 2015) and recommendations

(Heller Baird & Parasnis, 2011), in which case their social media followers can convert to future customers (Denning, 2011).

Secondly, the screening, sense-making, and reprocess of information collected from social media remains understudied in practice (Larson & Watson, 2011; Chen, Chiang, & Storey, 2012; Harrigan, 2013). Social media upholds diverse formats of information, consisting of statistics (i.e. quantitative data such as number of followers; number of hits; and number of ‘likes’ or ‘shares’), narratives (i.e. qualitative data such as comments and posts), emoticons (i.e. symbolic data that is a digital representation of facial expressions), and pictures/flash animations/videos, from a variety of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. In this case, each type of data may need a specialized framework to ‘decode’ what underlies the apparent meaning of the data if the data is multi-layered (Larson & Watson, 2011), therefore making the corresponding analysis and synthesis rather taxing and strenuous. For instance, Thomas & Brook-Carter’s (2011) study statistically reveals that the bulk of the surveyed companies (i.e. 72%) do not measure, or have no idea if they had previously measured, the return of investment (ROI) obtained from social media, whilst in Stelzner’s (2013) study a small proportion of the surveyed companies were able to gauge their social media presence and impact.

In other words, the growing social media adoption suffers an ambiguity surrounding how to properly gauge social media activities (Stokes & Nelson, 2013). Such an ambiguity stems from the unprofessionalism embedded in the operational management of SMEs (see **Section 3.4.2** for details). One particular manifestation of such unprofessionalism is SMEs’ lack of knowledge/expertise/technical knowhow regarding effective social media adoption (Halme & Korpela, 2014; Ahmad et al., 2017). They are subject to insufficient time to learn and evaluate social media

(Thomas & Brook-Carter, 2011). The lack of financial investment to implement these web-based technologies is also regarded as a constant restraint (Cockerill, 2013; Lee & Wicks, 2010). A potential solution to counter these barriers is associated with the provision of training sessions to employees (Oracle, 2012), by means of accessing low-cost materials online such as webinars, videos, and online courses. Moreover, SMEs also lack uniform measurement of social media activities (McCann & Barlow, 2015; Nakara et al., 2012), especially one that can convert their customer engagement in the form of likes, shares and comments into business profits (Mitic & Kapoulas, 2012). In this regard, a measure of profitability specialised for social media must be defined in order to, for instance, map out the outcome, monitor followership, and provide feedback (Oracle, 2012).

In addition, it is usually the owner-managers who are held responsible for initiating social media adoption, signalling a top-down, strategy-centric adoption routine that differs diametrically from the bottom-up, customer-centric approach eminent in large companies (Zeiller & Schauer, 2011). This may lead to a more personalised style of managing social media activities (Rauniar et al., 2014). Although retaining a relatively more casual tone of voice and revealing certain personal details might help foster the impression of being trustworthy (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Koch et al., 2012), it still risks being viewed as unprofessional (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Wang et al., 2011). Further, the experimental patterns of SMEs' social media practice, that is, decision-makers' insufficient awareness of what and how to invest or expect, often incur inconsistent outcomes (Barnes et al., 2012; Nakara et al., 2012; Harris, Rae, & Misner, 2012). Thus, owner-managers' attitude towards social media adoption is pivotal. However, certain characteristics of owner-managers might make them less psychologically prone to new technologies such as social media.

For instance, Wamba & Carter (2014) identified that younger managers are more likely to accept social media adoption than older managers. Also, the level of education background was also found to be positively related to owner-managers' receptiveness to social media (Roy & Dionne, 2015).

Additionally, social media reportedly diversifies a firm's audience online (Skovholt & Svennevig, 2006), whilst enhancing the visibility of the firm's publicised messages (French & Read, 2013), the diversity of the firm's social media followers can pose more divergent cognitive demands (Hogan, 2010). Such diversified cognitive demands inevitably elicit a 'collapsed context' (i.e. 'collapsed context' signals the heterogeneity of organisational audience on social media, see Marwick, 2010 and Farnham & Churchill, 2011 for details), which makes it difficult to manage the firm's social media activities (Hogan, 2010; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). Such a barrier may result in the involuntary leakage of inappropriate information on social media (Scott & Orlikowski, 2014; Leonardi & Barley, 2010; Pilkington, 2013), which is often referred to as 'bad postings' such as use of inappropriate language, publication of offensive content, and emotional outbursts (Wang et al., 2011), as well as instantaneous publication of poor customer experience (Helms et al., 2017). To conclude, as Larson & Watson (2011) imply, it calls for future research to delve how SMEs measure and 'decipher' information obtained from social media and more importantly how they accordingly strategize social media to engage with their followers. In a similar vein, the next section will elaborate on why strategizing social media from an OIM perspective significantly matters.

### **3.3.4 Social Media: From an OIM perspective**

OIM occurring on social media is intimately associated with Goffman's (1959) proposition pertaining to mediated conversations (Rettie, 2009; Subramaniam et al.,



2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). Interactions through social media, which features a non-physical situation, are clearly facilitated by technology (Goffman, 1959; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). Hence, they are theorised as being ‘mediated’ by social media from a material point of view (Subramaniam et al., 2013; Rettie, 2009), and being ‘situation-like’ from a sociological perspective (Goffman, 1959; Rettie, 2009; Leonardi, 2013). In this case, being ‘mediated’ typically reflects the technological intervention in social interactions, whereas being ‘situation-like’ represents the ineptitude of such technology-intervened interactions in constructing a perfect situation that permits a complete array of social cues that are normally accessible in interpersonal interactions (Goffman, 1959; 1979; Rettie, 2009; Subramaniam et al., 2013). In other words, interactions mediated by social media can only attain partially a perfect situation (i.e. face-to-face interactions) and hence can only be deemed as being ‘situation-like’ (Goffman, 1959; Rettie, 2009). Here, social cues, which are regarded as the integral part of a perfect situation, embody features such as gestures, body language, and tone of voice (Goffman, 1959; 1979; Rettie, 2009). These social cues are fitted as signals for both ends of an interaction to moderate their responses (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). It is noteworthy that the lack of social cues in mediated interactions can aggravate the cognitive demands on performers (Leonardi, 2013; Raghuram, 2013), especially when social media users are anonymous. Thereby, the state of being ‘situation-like’ impede OIM practice on social media (Subramaniam et al., 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). Having taken into account the conception of ‘situation-like’, it becomes imperative to understand how OIM is integrated with interactions mediated by social media in prior literature.

Prior literature demonstrates a dearth of studies that have integrated OIM strategies with organizations' social media adoption as a way to sustain organizational image (Bolino et al., 2008; Culnan et al., 2010; Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014; Fieseler & Ranzini, 2015). It is affirmed that strategized management of a firm's social media activities exerts a positive impact on the organisational impressions perceived by social media audiences (Benthaus, Risius, & Beck, 2016; Miller and Tucker, 2013). Although some of the social media platforms, among which the most noteworthy example is SNS (e.g. Facebook), as nascent environments for self-presentation, have attracted abundant scholarly attention (e.g. Wohn & Spottswood, 2016; Lang & Barton, 2015; Hall, Pennington, & Lueders, 2013), it is clear that much have been documented solely from an individual, socio-psychological lens, that is, netizens' demeanours to shape, improve, and sustain favourable web-based persona (Marder et al., 2016; Zhao et al., 2008).

Since OIM, as detailed in *Chapter 2*, differs sharply from self-presentation in terms of the benefiting party of the IM-laden actions (i.e. IM at the individual level), this section will evaluate solely existing literature pertaining to social media through which organizations seek to operationalize OIM. The first conspicuous piece of research attempted to adapt the established OIM strategies to several frequently used social media platforms and gauge how such adaptations affect firms' financial performance (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013). Utilizing text-mining as the technique for data collection and analysis, Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans (2013) first asserted that direct-assertive OIM strategies in general help improve a firm's financial performance. Behind this broad claim, the researchers further argued that although prior studies found intimidation impeditive to organizational image in many social occasions (e.g. Elsbach, Sutton, & Principe, 1998), it is a efficacious indicator of

financial progress, given that a firm sometimes benefits from showcasing on its website its power over relevant parties (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013). Meanwhile, supplication, a diametrical opposition of intimidation, also enhances a firm's financial performance. A plausible explanation to such an incongruence was provided by the researchers that key stakeholders demonstrates mixed mentalities as they worship powerful characters and sympathize with underdogs simultaneously (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013). Further, this study yielded a distinctive result that disapproves many preceding discoveries: organizational promotion and exemplification, which were found decisive in the creation of desired images, pose no significant impact on financial performance. This is probably because the iterative usage of these two strategies generates no accumulative effect on, but rather fatigues customers and other organizational audiences (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013). Nonetheless, the scope of this study may limit the extent to which the findings can be generalized. Compared with preceding studies, this study, although drew upon a reasonable amount of subjects (150 firms and tens of thousands of sentences for text-mining), only cross-compared five direct-assertive OIM strategies when alternative strategies (e.g. indirect-assertive strategies) might affect financial performance as well. Therefore, it will be insightful if future research incorporates a wider range of OIM strategies. Also, subjects under assessment in this study are large firms that benefit from scale economies and future research may look into the sector of small businesses in search for, if any, contingencies result-wise.

Another study that has managed to extend the existing list of OIM strategies was also dependent upon discourse analysis. Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen (2014) examined corporate Facebook pages in an attempt to identify major patterns of the strategic deployment of OIM on social media and how such patterns fit in the social media

context. The scholars discovered two salient categories of OIM strategies that were allegedly exclusive to social media context: social acceptability and credibility. The former refers to the utility of conventional politeness, moral discourses, and diversion from topics that may pose threats to the image of the company, whereas the latter embodies category entitlement and stake, varying footings, and ridicule as the strategies employed to promote a firm's credibility online (Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014). Among the strategies identified, conventional politeness was found to be constantly present in social media communications between firms and customers. Hence, such a rhetoric-centric strategy was accounted essential, irrespective of the occasion (Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014). Another significant finding is related to organizational defamation as discussed in **Section 2.3.3.2**. Specifically, firms might defame the critics so as to increase their own credibility. Such a provocative strategy, which was found efficacious in practice, resonates with intimidation addressed in Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans's (2013) work. Moreover, a major practical implication of the study is the paradoxical situation found to be unsettling for social media handlers (the ones who manage corporate social media accounts). On the one hand, the individual IM regularly exerted by those handlers to socialize with people tends to influence the way they implement OIM strategies on behalf of their companies. This indicates a shift towards a more personalized style in corporate communication with stakeholders. On the other hand, this shift is subject to public scrutiny. For instance, aggressive response to a particular customer review may offend wider audiences, since on social media a particular conversation is accessible to all. Despite all the significant findings yielded, the representativeness of the data is vulnerable due to the small dataset (two companies) used in the analysis.

Most recently, Benthhaus, Disius, & Beck (2016) explored how companies use social media management (SMM) tools to influence the public perceptions of online stakeholders, using a mixed methods approach (i.e. discourse analysis and interviews). Firstly, the findings ascertain that active social media engagement, which is supported by OIM, efficaciously consolidates the attitudinal loyalty of customers. In this case, such active engagement denotes a customer-centric approach as information posted on social media must resonate with customers (Benthhaus, Disius, & Beck, 2016). In addition, the findings also suggest an inconsistency among strategies deployed on different social media channels (Benthhaus, Disius, & Beck, 2016). This inconsistency stems from the outburst of new channels which have rapidly gained popularity among customers. Hence, firms are forced to extend their social media engagement to these new channels, making it rather challenging to align all the social media accounts to serve a common purpose (Benthhaus, Disius, & Beck, 2016).

### **3.4 Summary**

The existing literature with regard to OIM application in the context of SMEs is limited in the following areas:

Firstly, the vast majority of the overall OIM literature is centred upon large corporations (Bolino et al., 2008; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). As elaborated in **Section 3.2.3**, SMEs have features that can be rarely seen in large corporations. For instance, when compared with large firms, SMEs are more likely to 1) experience external uncertainty due to their constrained access to market power (Deakins & Freel, 2012); 2) have personalised managerial style due to their lack of qualified employees (Doern, 2009) and staff training (Ahmad et al., 2017; Beynon et al., 2015); 3) attain a strong interest in innovation due to their lack of resources (Van Praag & Versloot, 2007); and 4) depend on customer loyalty (Galbreath, 2017), local

communities (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017), and inter-organisational collaborations (Muscio, 2007). Given all these features, SMEs are expected to practise OIM in a different way, if compared with large firms.

Secondly, the bulk of the studies probing OIM application in the context of SMEs adopt an entrepreneurial stance, since entrepreneurs' enactment of OIM unavoidably involves individual-level IM strategies, which are usually available in interpersonal encounters (e.g. Yusuf, 2011; Nagy et al., 2012; Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014; Wu & Ma, 2018; Thompson-Whiteside, Turnbull, & Howe-Walsh, 2018; Balen, Tarakci, & Sood, 2019; Benson et al., 2015; Tang, Khan, & Zhu, 2012; Kibler et al., 2017; Shepherd & Haynie, 2011). In other words, entrepreneurs' personal qualities such as physical appearance, vocal characteristics, and non-verbal communication (see Yusuf, 2011 and Nagy et al., 2012 for details) are an integral part of the OIM performance and hence they are inevitably being accessed and examined by stakeholders especially in face-to-face situations (Smith & Mackie, 2007). In this regard, such personal qualities are prioritized in the existing literature and hence such image-shaping performance is largely influenced by entrepreneurs' individual behaviours, rather than the qualities of the new ventures they represent. This can also be explained from a legitimacy perspective as in these studies the organizational legitimacy pertaining to the structures and processes of new ventures is commonly intertwined with the personal legitimacy of the entrepreneurs (Suchman, 1995). Therefore, such image-shaping behaviours, as being used by individuals (i.e. entrepreneurs) to exert an impact on organisational outcomes (e.g. resource acquisition, rationalisation of misconducts, and moderation of self-views following failures), can be understood as individual-level IM in organisational settings (Bolino et al., 2008). A typical example of individual-level IM in organisational settings is that entrepreneurs enact IM strategies

while presenting business ideas to potential investors (e.g. face-to-face interactions), in order to raise funds for their new ventures (e.g. Yusuf, 2011). As a consequence, it will be intriguing to explore situations where SMEs are viewed as a collective without the use of individual-level IM enacted by entrepreneurs, meaning that the personal legitimacy of entrepreneurs is marginalised (if understood from a legitimacy perspective). As a result, this calls for future research to focus on OIM practised by SMEs as a collective. In addition, most prior studies have focused on the legitimization of start-ups, in which investors are regarded as the main audience (e.g. Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014; Benson et al., 2015; Shepherd & Haynie, 2011; Tang, Khan, & Zhu, 2012). In fact, other types of audience are also non-negligible constituents in the survival and growth of SMEs such as customers (Galbreath, 2017; Van de Ven & Jeurissen, 2005; Du et al., 2007). Nevertheless, the extant literature lacks in-depth explorations on how OIM strategies serve to shape perceptions of alternative types of audience and this is an area where future research is expected to explore.

In terms of the existing literature pertaining to OIM with social media settings, a few insights can be derived as follows:

Firstly, the vast majority of the studies within this realm concentrate on large corporations. This ought to trigger future research to embark on SMEs in search for any incongruence regarding the way OIM is operationalized on social media. Secondly, the analysed literature offers solid evidence that social media is a fruitful data source that undoubtedly suffices for analytical mechanisms such as text mining (e.g. Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013), thematic analysis (e.g. Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016), discourse analysis (e.g. Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014), and historical content analysis (e.g. Zaharopoulos & Kwok, 2017).

In particular, multiple formats of data such as texts<sup>4</sup>, pictures, hyperlinks, and videos can be easily monitored and measured on social media (Wang, Pauleen, & Zhang, 2016). Thirdly, social media has triggered and facilitated OIM strategies that are rarely observed in face-to-face interactions. For instance, Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen (2014) emphasized that ‘diversion’ is made available due to the time delays between messages in social media-mediated communications, whereas such a strategy is often impeded in face-to-face interactions, where immediate responses are often required. Thus, it is of great importance for future research to explore, if any, new OIM strategies that are cultivated exclusively on social media. A related fact is that some OIM strategies such as ‘intimidation’, which are normally viewed risky in organisational communications due to their provocative nature (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999), exert a positive impact on some organisational outcomes such as financial performance (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013). This again exemplifies the potential of social media to transform existing OIM strategies, so that contrasting outcomes are generated (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013). Consequently, future research may seek to delve whether existing OIM strategies can be adjusted to diversify outcomes across different organisational contexts. Finally, the extant literature has documented an audience-centric approach used by large firms to decide what content should go viral on social media (e.g. Benthaus, Disius, & Beck, 2016). It will be intriguing to understand whether the audience-centric selection of content remains prevalent in the context of SMEs since SMEs usually uphold a leader-centric<sup>5</sup> managerial style (Storey & Greene, 2010).

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<sup>4</sup> Textual information is still the most favoured format for analysis, although others have increasingly been gaining popularity among scholars (Kaplan & Harnlein, 2010)

<sup>5</sup> Strategy deployment is dictated by the preference of leaders such as owner-managers in the context of SMEs. See Storey & Greene (2010) for details.



Overall, *Chapter 2 & 3* have identified the research gaps by reviewing the existing body of knowledge. The identified research gaps and the relevant areas of literature linked with the research questions are illustrated respectively in *Table 11* and *Table 12*. Given the identified research gaps, the next chapter introduces the overall research aim, research questions, and the corresponding methodological design employed in this study.

***Table 11: Research Gaps Identified from Existing Literature***

| Existing OIM literature  | Research subjects |                        | Individual-level IM involved |    | Platform on which OIM is practised |              | Targets  |                       |
|--|-------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|----|------------------------------------|--------------|----------|-----------------------|
|  | Large firms       | SMEs/ Entrepreneurship | Yes                          | No | Traditional Media                  | Social Media | Investor | Social Media Audience |
| Stream 1: OIM practised by large firms in offline interactions | X                 |                        |                              | X  | X                                  |              | X        |                       |
| Stream 2: OIM practised by large firms on social media         | X                 |                        |                              | X  |                                    | X            |          | X                     |
| Stream 3: OIM enacted by entrepreneurs for their new venture   |                   | X                      | X                            |    | X                                  |              | X        |                       |
| The present study: OIM practised by SMEs on social media       |                   | X                      |                              | X  |                                    | X            |          | X                     |

**Table 12: Areas of Literature Linked with Research Questions**

| Research Questions   |  | Relevant Literature   |  |
|--|--|---|--|
| <b>RQ1</b> (focusing on organisational impressions projected by SMEs online)                   | Foundation and development of OIM (e.g. Jones & Pittman, 1985; Spear & Roper, 2013; Van Halderen et al., 2016) | OIM application in the context of SMEs/entrepreneurship (e.g. Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014; Wu & Ma, 2018; Thompson-Whiteside, Turnbull, & Howe-Walsh, 2018)  | OIM in mediated communications (e.g. Rettie, 2009; Subramaniam et al., 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016)  |
|  | OIM strategies (e.g. Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016)               | OIM strategies in the context of SMEs/entrepreneurship (e.g. Benson et al., 2015; Balen, Tarakci, & Sood, 2019)   | OIM strategies on social media (e.g. Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014)  |
| <b>RQ2</b> (focusing on OIM strategies employed by SMEs on social media)                       | Foundation and development of OIM (e.g. Jones & Pittman, 1985; Spear & Roper, 2013; Van Halderen et al., 2016) | Characteristics of SMEs including external uncertainty (e.g. Antunes, Quiros, & Justino, 2018), managerial style (e.g. Fleming, Lynch, & Kelliher, 2016), innovation (e.g. Mohsin et al., 2017), and commitment to local communities (e.g. López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017) | Social media adoption in SMEs including motivations (e.g. McCann & Barlow, 2015); benefits and drawbacks (e.g. Guha, Paul, & Soutar, 2018); and challenges/constraints (e.g. Dutot & Bergeron, 2016) |
|  | OIM strategies (e.g. Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016)               |   |  |
| <b>RQ3</b> (focusing on organisational qualities affecting SMEs' OIM practice on social media) | Foundation and development of OIM (e.g. Jones & Pittman, 1985; Spear & Roper, 2013; Van Halderen et al., 2016) | Characteristics of SMEs including external uncertainty (e.g. Antunes, Quiros, & Justino, 2018), managerial style (e.g. Fleming, Lynch, & Kelliher, 2016), innovation (e.g. Mohsin et al., 2017), and commitment to local communities (e.g. López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017) | Social media adoption in SMEs including motivations (e.g. McCann & Barlow, 2015); benefits and drawbacks (e.g. Guha, Paul, & Soutar, 2018); and challenges/constraints (e.g. Dutot & Bergeron, 2016) |
|  | OIM strategies (e.g. Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016)               |   |  |

## CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the methodology employed in this research study. It is structured by firstly specifying the overall research aim and the corresponding research questions that serve to explore the identified research gaps identified in *Chapter 2 & 3*, and guide the whole methodology. *Section 4.3* explains and justifies the paradigmatic assumptions, with which the present study has been conducted. Moreover, *Section 4.4* elaborates on the specific methodological design which consists of rationale, sampling, data collection, and data analysis. Finally, *Section 4.5* features a discussion over research ethics.

### 4.2 Research Aim and Questions

Before mapping out the methodological design, it is imperative to articulate the overall aim and research questions of the present study upon which the methodological design is based. Also, the linkage between the overall aim and the research questions are explained in detail.

The research gaps identified in *Chapter 2 & 3* can be summarised as follows. Firstly, new OIM strategies or new ways of using existing strategies have been developed to cater to varying organisational contexts (e.g. Bansal & Kistruck, 2006; Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015; Graffin, Haleblan, & Kiley, 2016). Also, functionality of social media triggers new forms of OIM strategies that is considered unviable in interpersonal encounters (e.g. Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014). Further, provided the fact that SMEs differ significantly from large firms in various aspects (e.g. lack of staff training in SMEs, see Cosh et al., 2005 and Mazzarole, 2014 for

details), SMEs are likely to shape impressions in ways that largely differ from those prevalent in large firms. Finally, since OIM enacted by entrepreneurs inevitably associates with IM at the individual level (e.g. personal charisma, see Yusuf, 2011 for details), the existing literature focusing on OIM practised by SMEs as a whole is limited.

Given the above research gaps, the overall research aim is to explore ‘how OIM is practiced by SMEs on social media’. To achieve this overall aim, three research questions have been established. Firstly, organisational image/impression is deemed as the stimulus for OIM strategies (Jones & Pittman, 1985; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016) and hence they can be understood as a constituent of OIM practice. In other words, the implementation of an OIM strategy is driven by the intent of perpetuating a particular image/impression, so that this particular image/impression can be cognitively accepted by the target audience, namely, the recipient of the OIM strategy (Jones & Pittman, 1985; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016). Since SMEs have characteristics that are fundamentally different from those of large corporations (see *Section 3.2.3* for details), SMEs are inclined to perpetuate images/impressions that are intrinsically inconsistent with those of large corporations on social media. Consequently, the first research question (**RQ1**) is designed to explore how SMEs desire to be perceived online. Secondly, as elaborated in the literature review, OIM strategies vary across different contexts. For instance, certain empirical studies mark a shift of OIM strategies from the individual level to the organisational level (e.g. Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015), from large firm context from SME/entrepreneurship context (e.g. Benson et al., 2015), and from offline communication to online communication (e.g. Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014).

Therefore, the second research question (**RQ2**) is designed to explore OIM strategies that are formulated to adapt to the contextual features of SMEs and social media. Finally, as the research context of this study differs sharply from that of prior studies, the third research question (**RQ3**) is designed to understand what qualities of the specified context have affected the overall OIM practice. To conclude, these three research questions are as follows:

**RQ1:** How do SMEs desire to be perceived online?<sup>6</sup>

**RQ2:** In order to shape the desired impressions/images online, what OIM strategies do SMEs employ on social media?

**RQ3:** What organisational qualities have affected SMEs' OIM practice on social media?

The next section underpins the philosophical considerations of this study.

### **4.3 Philosophical Underpinnings**

Before mapping out a research philosophy, it becomes imperative to consider the assumptions regarding the nature of the inquired reality, what constitutes knowledge of this reality, and what therefore are appropriate methods of building knowledge of this reality (Punch, 2014; Marsh & Furlong, 2010). These assumptions collectively reflect the essentiality of what is meant by the term 'paradigm' in the research methodology. In general, paradigm denotes an assemblage of assumptions about the world, and about what construct and guide appropriate topics and techniques for

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<sup>6</sup> What are SMEs' desired organisational impressions/images online?

inquiring into that world (Mayring, 2014). According to Denzin & Lincoln (1994: pp. 107), a paradigm can be understood as follows:

*'A set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimate or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of 'the world', the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts'.*

In order to fully understand the propriety of any method of inquiry in use, it is also critical to address the interrelated dimensions that fundamentally mirror what is meant by a paradigm, namely, epistemology, ontology and methodology. In general, epistemology and ontology offer a theoretical perspective of *'looking at the world and making sense of it'* (Crotty, 1998: p.8) and they jointly inform methodology by *'contextualising and grounding the research process in order to utilise appropriate strategy to resolve research questions which assists in determining credibility in social research'* (Ashworth, 2008: p. 109). Respectively, epistemology serves to inquire about *'the relationship between the knower and what can be known'* (Punch, 2014: p. 15). Alternatively put, it attempts to clarify the linkage between the researcher and the reality he/she probes into (Bryman, 2016). Meanwhile, ontology principally concerns the form and nature of reality (Marsh & Furlong, 2010). In other words, it concerns whether social entities are deemed objective and external to social actors (i.e. realism) or they are socially constructed upon the perceptions and actions of social actors (i.e. constructivism) (Bryman, 2016). In Practice, ontological assumptions and commitments guide the way in which research questions are formulated (Bryman, 2016). Methodology refers to how the inquirer identifies what can be known (Punch, 2014). It signals the selection and orchestration of methods used for understanding the reality. In summary, the triplet dimensions of a paradigm illustrate the correlations between methods and their underlying philosophical issues. In this regard, methods,

on the one hand, are ultimately based on, and derive from paradigms, and on the other hand, paradigms have implications for methods (Ashworth, 2008).

#### **4.3.1 Brief Historical Background**

Since 1960s, the traditional dominance of quantitative methods, as the way of doing empirical social science research, was challenged (Punch, 2014). This challenge also sparked a major growth of interest in operationalising qualitative methods and therefore, in turn, elicited a split in the field, between quantitative and qualitative researchers (Bryman, 2016). In 1990s, the situation intensified as many remained loyal to a rigid positivistic conception of research with a quantitative, experimental methodology, whilst others, just as emphatic, upheld an open, explorative, descriptive, interpretive conception using qualitative methods (Mayring, 2014). As a result, a prolonged quantitative-qualitative debate ensued, often addressed as the ‘paradigm wars’ (Punch, 2014). Most importantly, there is an explicit tendency that qualitative methods have now been considerably more appreciated by scholars than decades ago, given the marginalised position they once had in social science (Bryman, 2016). Thus, it becomes imperative to unfold and make sense of the philosophical positions and their associated characteristics before undertaking the research.

#### **4.3.2 Conflicting Paradigms in Organisation Studies**

The aforementioned ‘paradigm wars’ (Punch, 2014) and the ensuing debate on paradigm incommensurability are rooted in Kuhn’s (1962) highly influential work that initially defined, and sparked a discourse in organisation studies to develop, the terms ‘paradigm’ and ‘incommensurability’ (Watkins-Mathys & Lowe, 2005). It also underlies Burrell & Morgan’s (1979) thesis that proposes their typology of four narratives of the social world, which allegedly could be used to categorise all

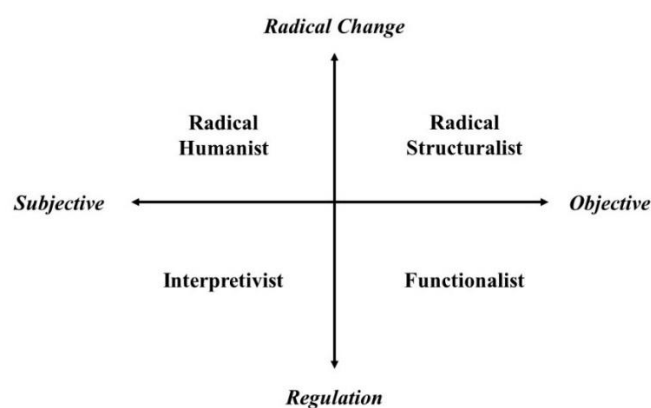
management research (Lee & Jones, 2015). The underlying notion of Burrell & Morgan's (1979) thesis is that philosophical assumptions and assumptions regarding the nature of society dictate and differentiate the approaches to social science (Grant & Perren, 2002). In other words, they argue that research must be framed within the boundaries established by their philosophical and sociological traditions in order to eventually '*develop a systematic and coherent perspective within the guidelines which each paradigm offers*' (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: p. 397). Consequently, paradigms, in light of Burrell & Morgan (1979) (e.g. the aforementioned four narratives), are bounded and contrary to each other.

To be specific, Burrell & Morgan's (1979) typology is two-faceted. The horizontal axis is associated with assumptions regarding the nature of science (i.e. ontology and epistemology, see **Section 4.3** for details), whereas the vertical axis dependent upon assumptions regarding the nature of society. The former is a continuum named as 'objective-subjective', whilst the latter as 'radical-regulation'. In this case, the objective side embarks on the perspective that the social world is conceived as '*a hard, external, objective reality*' (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: p. 3), which can be interpreted by universal laws that are fully accessible to researchers, whilst the subjective stance is associated with '*an understanding of the way in which the individual creates, modifies, and interprets the world*' (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: p. 3) and hence prioritises individual interpretations of their distinct experiences. Also, the 'radical' side of the 'radical-regulation' continuum signifies '*explanations for the radical change, deep-seated structural conflict, modes of domination and structural contradiction, which [they] see as characterising modern society*' (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: p. 17), whereas the 'regulatory' side is predominantly represented by the



provision of ‘*explanations of society in terms which emphasise its underlying unity and cohesiveness*’ (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: p. 17).

Given these two continuums, four mutually exclusive ‘sociological’ paradigms have been conceptualised: functionalist, interpretive, radical humanist, and radical structuralist (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). First, guided by an objective view of reality, functionalists are seen as being concerned with ‘*how organisations and society maintain order*’ (Grant & Perren, 2002: p. 187). Interpretivists are depicted as being concerned with ‘*individual perceptions of their organisations and society*’ (Grant & Perren, 2002: p. 187) and taking a subjective view of reality. Radical humanists uphold a subjective view of reality and they are determined to interpret ‘*radical changes in organisations and society*’ (Grant & Perren, 2002: p. 187). Radical structuralists are also dedicated to interpreting ‘*radical changes in organisations and society*’ (Grant & Perren, 2002: p. 187), but they take an objective view of reality. Overall, Burrell & Morgan’s (1979) typology of paradigms is outlined in **Figure 1** below:



**Figure 1: Burrell & Morgan’s (1979) Typology of Paradigms (Source: Grant & Perren, 2002: p. 187)**

Regardless of its massive influence on subsequent debate on paradigmatic assumptions, this typology has attracted a lot of criticisms. For instance, Greenfield (1993: p.178) accuses the typology of being grounded on over-simplistically and vaguely demarcated dimensions, with which '*complex and diverse notions are forced into artificial and ill-fitting unity*'. Carr & Leivesley (1995) believe that the way this typology is structured arbitrarily separates the epistemological and ontological assumptions which should have been closely related and it unavoidably elicits a condition of incommensurability as the four paradigms are mutually exclusive and opposed to each other. Moreover, some believe that the typology lacks dynamism by arguing that academic community is obligated to foster new paradigms (Willmott, 1993), which can be considered as new ways of understanding social phenomena (Scherer & Steinmann, 1999). In a similar vein, some stress that multi-paradigm communication (Gioia et al., 1989; Gioia & Pitré, 1990), or even more complicated alternatives (Weaver & Gioia, 1994), are required. In response to these criticisms, further development has been made to the typology which features 1) slightly modified dimensions with the same theoretical building blocks (e.g. Deetz, 1996); and 2) extensions tackling the issue of incommensurability (e.g. Scherer, 1998). Overall, Burrell & Morgan's (1979) original typology remains one of the most extensively adopted paradigmatic frameworks and offers a reasonable basis for organisation studies, especially in the context of SMEs (Grant & Perren, 2002),

More recently, there is a vast array of paradigms that have been heavily addressed in existing literature. Although the constituent elements vary across different authors, some of the extant literature tends to be converging and simplifying. In one version of this convergence, the major paradigms are positivism and interpretivism, and in another they are positivism and constructivism (or sometimes constructionism)

(Ashworth, 2008). There are notable divergences across different theorists. For example, some claim that interpretivism is the epistemological manifestation of what diametrically opposes against what is meant by positivism whilst constructivism is a paradigmatic term often used to describe the ontological position antithetical to that of positivism (Bryman, 2016). In this case, the epistemological and ontological stances of positivism are termed respectively as ‘objectivism’ and ‘naïve realism’ (Mayring, 2014; Bryman, 2016). However, some argue that objectivism is an independent paradigm that is closely linked to positivism (Gray, 2014). Among all these divergent reflections, McKelvey (1997) asserts that all paradigms can be categorised by only two conflicting stances: objectivists featuring ‘*positivist and scientific realist testability criterion*’, and subjectivists featuring ‘*interpretation, narrative description and social construction*’ (Lee & Jones, 2015: p. 343). In line with such an assertion, many scholars believe that positivism and constructivism are the two ends of a paradigmatic continuum with all possible variants positioned in between (e.g. Mayring, 2014; Bryman, 2016; Gray, 2014; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). To illustrate the point, **Table 13** offers demonstration of such a paradigmatic continuum as follows:

**Table 13: Basic Beliefs (Metaphysics) of Alternative Inquiry Paradigms**

| Item         | Positivism  | Post-Positivism  | Critical Theory   | Constructivism   |
|--------------|---|--|---|--|
| Epistemology | Naïve realism – “real” reality but apprehensible                                    | Critical realism – “real” reality but only imperfectly and probabilistically apprehensible                           | Historical realism – virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values; crystallized over time | Relativism – local and specific constructed and co-constructed realities |
| Ontology     | Dualistic/objectivistic; findings true  | Modified dualistic/objectivistic; critical tradition/community; findings probably true                               | Transactional/subjectivist; value-mediated findings   | Transactional/subjectivist; created findings                             |
| Methodology  | Experimental/manipulative; verification of hypotheses; chiefly quantitative methods | Modified experimental/manipulative; critical multipism; falsification of hypotheses; may include qualitative methods | Dialogical/dialectical  | Hermeneutical/dialectical  |

*Source: Guba & Lincoln (2005: p. 193)*

#### 4.3.2.1 Positivism

Positivism, as the dominant paradigm in social science from the 1930s through to the 1960s, imitates the philosophical fundamentals of those prevalent in the realm of natural sciences and hence advocates the application of the methods of natural sciences to the study of social reality (Bryman, 2016). Its core argument is that ‘*the social world exists externally to the researcher*’ (Gray, 2014: p. 18), and the properties of the investigated social world is directly gaugeable through observation. Besides, there are a few principles that positivism probably entails. First, knowledge regarding social phenomena can only be legitimised if it has been ascertained by the senses (Bryman, 2016). Second, in addition to the notion reflected in the core argument that theory must be directly amenable to observation, positivists also insist that theory centres on causality and thereby the provision of universal laws is made viable (Bryman, 2016). In other words, no observations can be collected without being influenced by pre-existing theories and collection of empirical evidence to verify the observable laws is highly valued (Lee & Jones, 2015). Furthermore, in a positivist view, neutrality must

be and presumably can be preserved throughout the entire research process (i.e. there is a clear distinction between facts and value judgements) (Bryman, 2016). Lastly, positivism is often wed to quantitative methods and thereby strongly advocates a deductive approach (i.e. formulating and testing hypotheses) in empirical inquiries (Gray, 2014). In this regard, positivist research values generalisation (or facts) through statistical probability and hence its analytical units are normally ‘*reduced to simple terms*’ (Ashworth, 2008: p. 110). It is suggested that positivism-oriented, quantitative approaches, featuring large-volume mail surveys, pervade the realm of SMEs/entrepreneurship studies (Smith et al., 2013).

#### **4.3.2.2 Constructivism**

Constructivism – a term widely used to signify the indeterminacy of knowledge of the social world – indicates that the categories/codes created to help understand the realities are indeed socially constructed products (Bryman, 2016; Gray, 2014). Hence, the meaning of a particular category/code varies across different contexts (e.g. time and location). As a result, rich data is required to conceptualise ideas that embody ‘complexity of whole situations’ (Ashworth, 2008: p. 110). Further, this paradigm upholds a notion that the social phenomena and the corresponding categories/codes, instead of being independent from social actors, are established in and through interactions (Bryman, 2016). Here, such interactions are experientially dependent upon the individuals or groups (e.g. organisations) holding them. Besides, researchers’ personal accounts of the social world are also a constitutive ingredient of such interactions which are in a constant state of revision (Bryman, 2016; Guba & Lincoln, 1998).

It should be clarified that the aforementioned notion of ‘constructivism’, which is in line with the conceptualisation of Guba, Lincoln, and Denzin – three acclaimed figures in the field of qualitative inquiry – in their highly influential publications such as Lincoln & Guba (1985), Guba (1990), and Denzin & Lincoln (2005), leans towards that of ‘social constructionism’, since they both uphold a subjective epistemology (i.e. where knowledge is co-produced by the researcher and the researched.) and a relativistic ontology (i.e. which favours multiple realities instead of multiple theorisations of one reality, see Jones, 2002; Lee, 2012). As a consequence, these two terms are often used interchangeably (e.g. Peters et al., 2013; Gray, 2014; Bryman, 2016).

It is evident that attempts have been made to distinguish between ‘constructivism’ and ‘constructionism’. For instance, scholars such as Gergen (1999) view ‘constructivism’ as partially rooted in positivism. In this case, ‘constructivism’ is understood as a perspective, in which *‘an individual mind constructs reality but within a systematic relationship to the external world’* (Talja, Tuominen, & Savolainen, 2005: p. 81). Also, they contend that constructivists uphold a preconceived idea that objective truths regarding social phenomena can be formulated *‘beyond individuals’ subjective interpretations of a reality’* (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2009: p. 30). Such a dualistic ontology is incompatible with that of ‘social constructionism’, where *‘there is no knowledge beyond individuals’ subjective and inter-subjective interpretations of reality’* (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2009: p. 30). In a similar vein, Schwandt (1998) argues that ‘constructivism’ is centred around individual minds and cognitive processes, which are independently active in the sense-making activity, rather than collective creation of meaning, which remains the conception of ‘social constructionism’. Accordingly, Crotty (2003) believes that such particular

conceptualisation of ‘constructivism’ neglects the social dimension of meaning. Thus, it is indicated that ‘social constructionism’ fits better the context of SMEs/entrepreneurship, as it embraces the pluralism (e.g. interaction-based discourses with varied meanings are intended to describe complexity) in SMEs/entrepreneurship research (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2009).

Nevertheless, the idea of ‘social constructionism’ is not immune to criticisms. Kwan & Tsang (2001) and Reed (2005) have accused the ontological assumption of a social constructionist paradigm of being overly relativistic, through which all claims of knowledge can be accepted. Also, Gandy (1996) rejects the idea of constant social construction as it disables the efforts made to explicitly define reality. This might fundamentally obstruct the methodological design guided by a social constructionist perspective, since reality changes when knowledge changes (Gandy, 1996). Further, some radical viewpoints of ‘social constructionism’ also deny the existence of reality (Burningham & Cooper, 1999). Overall, these criticisms have questioned the suitability of ‘social constructionism’ in SME/entrepreneurship inquiry and adds to the complexity of paradigmatic debate.

In spite of the criticisms against ‘social constructionism’, the abovementioned academics seem to have generated a particularly radical conceptualisation of ‘constructivism’, when they try to differentiate it from ‘social constructionism’. For instance, Gergen’s (1999) definition of ‘constructivism’ is firmly grounded upon individual minds and cognitive process, thus implying that individual thoughts and inclinations can be the source for the explanation and deduction of human actions (Hosking & Hjorth, 2004). In doing so, the interaction between the knower and the correspondent, which results in the co-creation of understandings, is marginalised.

Such particular conceptualisation is often referred to as ‘cognitive constructivism’ (e.g. Gergen, 1999; Talja, Tuominen, & Savolainen, 2005) or ‘radical constructivism’ (e.g. Schwandt, 1998; Lee, 2012). In addition to this radical subset of ‘constructivism’, it seems that another subset of ‘constructivism’, also proposed by Gergen (1999), is more akin to the ‘constructivism’ conceptualised by Guba, Lincoln, and Denzin (i.e. the one adopted in the present study). This paradigm, often termed as ‘social constructivism’, integrates the ontological and epistemological assumptions of ‘cognitive constructivism’ with a social dimension. It suggests that an individual’s mental process of constructing reality is significantly affected by culture, social norms, historical experiences, and most notably, social interaction with significant others (Gergen, 1999). Such a definition considers knowledge as intrinsically social and the world where individuals live as *‘physically, socially, and subjectively constructed’* (Talja, Tuominen, & Savolainen, 2005: p. 82). More importantly, individuals’ knowledge, as being contextualised by the socio-cultural environment, is mutually constituted rather than independent from external influences (Talja, Tuominen, & Savolainen, 2005). Having incorporated the concept of social construction, as a result of human sense making, ‘social constructivism’ is hence inherently interpretative. Accordingly, changes of any form can only be facilitated by making step-by-step alterations to the narratives that solidify the discursive norms that build and define societal systems (Harré & Bhaskar, 2001; Peters et al., 2013). Overall, as an alternative to ‘social constructionism’, ‘constructivism’ defined by Guba, Lincoln, and Denzin (e.g. Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), or ‘social constructivism’, originally theorised by Gergen (1999), which values social construction between the researcher and the researched with a relativistic ontology and



a subjective epistemology, is also eligible in inquiring phenomena situated in the context of SMEs/entrepreneurship (this will be addressed further in *Section 4.3.3*).

#### **4.3.2.3 Paradigms in the ‘Middle’**

Mayring (2014) suggests that a strict contraposition of paradigms neglects the possible convergences. The indicated convergences have nurtured the formulation of paradigms that cast aside or refine some of the most colliding elements in both ends of the continuum shown in *Table 13*. Such alternative views with a mid-point between positivism and constructivism are dependent upon variations in ontology and epistemology (Rousseau et al., 2008). For instance, positivism has been modified or advanced to post-positivism or critical rationalism (Mayring, 2014). In this case, whilst ‘real’ social realities are still existent, they are only imperfectly comprehensible (Mayring, 2014). In particular, only an approximation to the reality (that is external to social constructions), combined with critical endeavours of researchers to falsify hypotheses, is deemed plausible (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Here, a distinction is explicitly acknowledged between the inquired social phenomena (regarded as ‘objects’ in a positivist perspective) and the categories employed to depict them. Also, the notion of contexts is eventually established, although it is only intended to help seek observable regularities in the social world (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). In a similar vein, constructivist theories have also been refined to allow certain convergences: whilst preserving the notion of individually constructed meanings, they have introduced the concept of a socially shared quasi-objective reality. For instance, contemporary hermeneutical approaches are prone to formulating rules of interpretation, by which the analysis obtains objectivity (Mayring, 2014). In addition, there are alternative attempts made to mitigate the paradigmatic collision confronted

in mixed-methods research. For instance, critical realism (also referred to as one of the building blocks of critical rationalism, see Albert, 2015 for details) has been formulated to fill the void of uncharted ground between positivism and constructivism (Al-Amoudi & Willmott, 2011; Lee & Jones, 2008; Menzies, 2012), by acknowledging an objective reality, '*mediated by individual perceptions and cognitions*' (Lee & Jones, 2015: p. 342). Thus, critical realists are inclined to combine qualitative and quantitative evidence by adopting a mixed-methods approach (Lee & Jones, 2015).

#### **4.3.3 Constructivism as the Paradigm Employed in This Study**

The present study adopts a constructivist perspective. It is crucial to rationalise why such a paradigm fits the context of this research study. Firstly, constructivism, as addressed above, features '*the active involvement of people in reality construction*' (Bryman & Bell, 2011: p. 21) and it denies the existence of an objective reality. In this regard, business research with a constructivist paradigm is powered to delve into the social constructions, and meanings adhered by key actors (e.g. companies and their audiences) to experiences, so as to make viable a contextual understanding (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002) and interpretation based on which a theory is built and generated (Carson et al., 2001). In a similar vein, Gilmore et al. (2001), Carrier et al. (2004), Wood & McKinley (2010), and Davidsson (2016) proclaim that a non-positivist approach, which priorities in-depth studies and qualitative data, fits better the research involved with social media and SMEs/entrepreneurship. Besides, it is suggested that a positivist approach, which favours 'width' over 'depth', falls short to address the complexity of business fields (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Moreover, Darmer (2000) argues that the priority of constructivism in management studies can be conceived as

‘what is management’, meaning that a constructivist study is primarily concerned with, instead of improving its efficacy, enhancing the knowledge of the terms and content of management. In a similar vein, Denscombe (2000) articulates that constructivist research is most suitable for understanding 1) ‘what’ is happening and 2) ‘why’ it is happening. This precisely conforms to what this study aims to explore as this study is guided by research questions including ‘what’ SMEs’ desired organisational images/impressions and corresponding OIM strategies are, and ‘why’ such OIM practice is shaped in the identified manner<sup>7</sup>. Most importantly, Shaw (1999) directly points out that small firm-related research is constantly shaped by the perceptions, behaviours, and experiences of owner-managers/entrepreneurs who often dictate the daily operations of their firms (i.e. their opinions matter to their social world). Thereby, it is indicated that a constructivist, qualitative, in-depth study becomes more eligible than a positivism-driven one within small firm/entrepreneurship settings (Shaw, 1999; Wood & McKinley, 2010). Furthermore, the nature of the research subject also fundamentally hinders the application of positivism. To be specific, the interaction between organisations and their audiences on social media, which acts as one integral element of the data, is socially constructed and will not stay unchanged. For instance, miscommunications on social media may lead to the emergence of negative audience impressions (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011; Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013). Similarly, responses produced by companies on social media are able to mitigate the negativity of the prior miscommunications and eventually overturn the previous audience impressions (Veil, Sellnow, & Petrun, 2012). This conforms to the idea that the realities of the focal

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<sup>7</sup> **RQ3** is ‘what organisational qualities have affected SMEs’ OIM practice on social media?’ Since the organisational qualities in question are responsible for the occurrence of SMEs’ desired organisational images/impressions and corresponding OIM strategies, they can be understood as, at least partially, the underlying rationale for the inquired OIM practice.

phenomenon are socially constructed (i.e. the ontological assumption of constructivism). Also, impressions are inherently subjective (Elsbach, 2003), and this indicates that even the same social cue may be interpreted in different ways and elicit different impressions when being embarked on in different contexts (e.g. different researchers may form different views of the same phenomenon, see Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016) for details). It is evident that this echoes the epistemological assumption of constructivism as the true meaning of knowledge is internally constructed (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Thus, the methodology adopted in this study is fully informed by the constructivist paradigm and the detailed description of the paradigmatic assumptions employed in the present study is provided in *Table 14* below:

***Table 14: Paradigmatic Assumptions Employed in the Present Study***

| <b>Paradigmatic Assumptions</b> | <b>Definition</b>   | <b>Constructivism Adopted in This Study</b>   |
|---------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Ontology</b>                 | Assumptions about the form and nature of realities, whether realities are objective, external to social actors or are socially constructed upon the perceptions and actions of social actors (Bryman, 2016) | Realities are socially negotiated (i.e. relativism)   |
| <b>Epistemology</b>             | Assumptions about the linkage between the researcher and the realities he/she probes into (Bryman, 2016; Easterby-Smith et al., 2002)   | The true meaning of knowledge is socially constructed: 1) created knowledge; 2) multiple interpretations; & 3) contextualised 'truth' (i.e. subjectivism)   |
| <b>Methodology</b>              | The combination of research techniques<br>The selection and orchestration of methods used for studying realities (Punch, 2014, Crotty, 1998)  | Qualitative, inductive multiple-case study featuring data collected from three sources: 1) firm manifestos; 2) social media postings; & 3) key informant interviews, and analysed through thematic analysis |

To sum up, the present study upholds the paradigmatic assumptions that realities are dependent upon social constructions (Bryman, 2016; Carson et al., 2001) as human interactions are thought to emerge from the sense-making process in which people are able to understand the social world, rather than act as a direct response to external stimuli (Poon & Swatman, 1997; Gray, 2018; Salmeron & Hurtado, 2006). With such a paradigm, the present research adopts a multiple-case study featuring data collected from SMEs' manifestos, social media postings and in-depth interviews with key social

media practitioners and interpreted through thematic analysis to meet the research objectives. Such a methodological design is compatible with social construction research process pinpointed by Bryman & Bell (2011).

#### **4.4 Research Design**

Research design can be depicted as '*the framework for collection and analysis of data*' (Bryman & Bell, 2011: p. 731). It fully reflects how a study meets its research objectives (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002), and it involves describing, explaining, understanding, and predicting the phenomena in question (Rajasekar et al., 2013). It is noteworthy that the established research questions dictate the overall research design (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Rajasekar et al., 2013). Simply put, these questions are in essence exploratory questions (i.e. 'how' and 'what' questions) and hence a qualitative, inductive approach is required to carry out the inquiry. Also, these three questions are designed to explore different aspects of the focal phenomenon and hence they naturally divide the research methodology into three phases: the first phase is centred on desired organisational impressions projected online; the second on the OIM strategies that help project these organisational impressions; and the third on the organisational qualities affecting the formulation of those organisational impressions and corresponding OIM strategies. Finally, these questions are designed to delve interrelated, yet different aspects of the focal phenomenon and therefore they rely on different data sources. Accordingly, each question is assigned with one data source (see **Section 4.4.4** for details), which is thought to be eligible for yielding insightful answers to each question. Overall, this study adopts a qualitative, inductive multiple-case study research design (see Eisenhardt, 1989 for details) that features data 1) collected from three different sources including firm manifestos, social media

postings, and key informant interviews; and 2) analysed through qualitative thematic analysis. This section is structured firstly by rationalising the use of a qualitative, inductive multiple-case study approach. Secondly, the sampling process is specified and justified. Further, the technique for data collection and data analysis is explained. Finally, procedures of fieldwork taken to conduct the research are outlined.

#### **4.4.1 Rationale for Adopting a Qualitative, Inductive Approach**

In social science, qualitative research, as opposed to quantitative research that prioritises statistical, mathematical, or computational techniques for directly measuring the investigated phenomena (Given, 2008), predominantly relies upon the researcher's analytic and integrative abilities and personal knowledge regarding the social contexts of the researched (Bryman, 2016; Bhattacharjee, 2012). Qualitative studies focus on sense-making, in which the key experience can be understood, rather than explanations or predictions (Van Esch & Van Esch, 2013). Consequently, qualitative methods have been increasingly employed by management studies, particularly small firm studies, '*in response to the failure of quantitative techniques to address new theory development*' (Fillis, 2006: p. 200). Here, the new theory development is fuelled by '*rich descriptions*' enabled by qualitative methods because '*the development of SMEs and the behaviours of owner-managers often does not fit neatly into models associated with traditional quantitative approaches*' (Cassell et al., 2006: p. 163). Further, it is via qualitative methods, case studies in particular, that the complexity of the inquired phenomena can be interpreted and understood (Gummesson, 2006). Therefore, a qualitative approach fits perfectly the present study which aims to explore OIM practised by SMEs on social media.

The inductive nature of the present study stems from the research gaps discussed in *Chapter 2 & 3*. Firstly, new OIM strategies or new ways of applying existing strategies have been identified to accommodate diverse organisational contexts. For instance, two new sets of OIM strategies, namely, ‘demonstrative’ and ‘illustrative’ strategies were developed by Bansal & Kistruck (2006) to justify energy corporations’ commitment to natural environment. Also, Sandberg & Holmlund (2015) proposed four new OIM strategies<sup>8</sup> that are specific to rhetorical styles used in corporate reports to enhance a firm’s sustainability perceived by its key stakeholders. In addition, Graffin, Halebian, & Kiley (2016) introduced a new strategy named ‘impression offsetting’ by integrating the notion of anticipatory OIM strategies originally formulated in studies such as Elsbach, Sutton, & Principe (1988), with expectancy violation theory. Consequently, the existing literature shows that new strategies could be developed, and existing strategies could be readjusted to accommodate the complexity of organisational contexts. In a similar vein, social media, the platform that mediates the communications between organisations and their target audiences, has evidently spurred the emergence of new OIM strategies, which are hardly used in face-to-face situations (e.g. Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014). One exemplar is that an OIM strategy named ‘diversion’ was identified by Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen (2014) to fully rely on the algorithm of Facebook, in which case it could not apply to interpersonal encounters. Moreover, organisations might seek to intensify their OIM on social media to retain the control over their perceived images (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011; Veil, Sellnow, & Petrun, 2012), since the heterogeneity of social media audiences<sup>9</sup> places additional cognitive demands on

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<sup>8</sup> These four new strategies are ‘subjective’, ‘positive’, ‘vague’, and ‘emotional’.

<sup>9</sup> Heterogeneity suggests that an organisation’s target audience is diversified by social media as it incorporates both recipients of messages and bystanders (Skovholt & Svennevig, 2006)

organisational representatives (Hogan, 2010). Thus, social media is another contextual factor that evidently reshapes OIM practice addressed in prior studies. Finally, the bulk of the existing OIM literature is akin to large firm settings (Bolino et al., 2008; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). Since SMEs have features that largely differ from those of large firms such as restricted access to market power (Storey & Greene, 2010), high dependency on customer loyalty (Galbreath, 2017), local communities (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017), and inter-organisational collaborations (Muscio, 2007), and a lack of qualified employees (Doern, 2009) and staff training (Ahmad et al., 2017; Beynon et al., 2015), they are likely to practise OIM in a different way, if compared with large firms. A further point is that IM enacted by entrepreneurs mainly concentrates on how individual behaviours affect organisational outcomes<sup>10</sup>, meaning that individual-level IM is unavoidably involved, such as an entrepreneur's charisma (e.g. Yusuf, 2011). Therefore, IM enacted by entrepreneurs is regarded as individual-level IM in organisational settings, which is beyond the scope of this study<sup>11</sup>. Additionally, social media practitioners post content in the name of their companies, which means their identity of being the organisational representatives, as opposed to that of entrepreneurs, is not explicitly revealed to the key audiences. Therefore, although Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo's (1999) taxonomy, which was developed with large firm settings, has been widely used in many recent publications (e.g. Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015; Windscheid et al., 2016; Benthous, Risius, & Beck, 2016), it fails to address the features of SMEs that largely differ from those of large firms. To conclude, the scope of this study is recognised as a fertile ground for new OIM

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<sup>10</sup> For instance, entrepreneurs present their business ideas to potential investors, hoping to obtain funding to grow their new ventures (see Yusuf, 2011 for details)

<sup>11</sup> This study solely focuses on OIM practised by SMEs as a collective, in which case no individual-level IM enacted by organisational representatives such as entrepreneurs is involved.



strategies or new ways of implementing existing OIM strategies and hence a qualitative, inductive approach is regarded as both instructive and reasonable to substantiate the contextual originality.

#### **4.4.2 Rationale for Adopting a Qualitative Case Study Approach**

As was discussed above, the present study adopts a multiple-case study approach. A case study is characterised as a research approach that fuels the exploration of a phenomenon within its context through multiple lenses (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This enables the explored phenomenon to be interpreted using various data sources that allow for different facets of the phenomenon to be understood. Unlike quantitative analysis which observes patterns based on the frequency of occurrence of the studied phenomenon (Zainal, 2007), case studies only focus on a small geographical area and number of subjects of interest (Yin, 2014). Therefore, a case study method is defined as *‘an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used’* (Yin, 2014: p. 23). Cepeda & Martin (2005) argue that management studies benefit immensely from using a case study approach because it 1) reveals and grasps a variety of facets of management; 2) facilitates the process of theory building; and 3) delves the complexity of managerial issues by answering ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions. Hence, case study research has been increasingly gaining popularity among qualitative researchers (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). More importantly, it is suggested that multiple cases allow a replication logic in which cases are deemed as experiments, with each serving to consolidate or disapprove inferences drawn from the others (Yin, 2014). Such a

process is believed to yield more robust, generalizable theory than single cases (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

In this section, the multiple-case study approach employed in this thesis is justified in three areas. *Section 4.4.2.1* discusses how the multiple-case study approach fits the constructivist paradigm. *Section 4.4.2.2* addresses how the multiple-case study with a relatively small sample can be eligible for the ‘generalisation’ of results and saturation of data. Finally, *Section 4.4.2.3* explains how the multiple-case study approach can be validated by incorporating data from multiple sources.

#### **4.4.2.1 Qualitative Case Study: From a Constructivist Perspective**

Case studies are commonly built upon a constructivist paradigm (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). In essence, constructivists uphold that realities are socially constructed and hence truth, as opposed to what positivists proclaim, is relative and subject to human interpretations (reliant on one’s viewpoint) (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This paradigm features the collaboration between the researcher and the participant through mechanisms such as story-telling (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). Here, the preconceptions of the researcher are refined and further developed during the interplay with the intensions of the ‘stories’ shared by the participant (Mayring, 2014). Thus, the findings of the analysis remain conditional upon the story contexts and the researcher (Robottom & Hart, 1993; Lather, 1992). Therefore, in order to encapsulate both the uniqueness of each individual case and the shared patterns across different cases (Stake, 2000; Baxter & Jack, 2008; Anaf et al., 2007), a multiple-case study was adopted in the present study.

#### 4.4.2.2 Qualitative Case Study: Generalisation & Saturation

Unlike in studies with positivist paradigm, generalisation is rarely prioritised by those with constructivist paradigm as the contextuality of qualitative research ‘*virtually excludes generalisability*’ and it is argued that generalisability often relies upon statistical significance in quantitative research (Ashworth, 2003: p. 69). Therefore, this research approach has been critiqued for its lack of scientific generalisation (e.g. Chetty, 1996). Nevertheless, Gummeson (2000) challenges the commonly known conception of generalisation and insists that it is too positivist-driven and hence has no solid ground in constructivist studies. In addition, it is noteworthy that constructivist studies do not diametrically reject the idea of generalisation. For instance, the present study allows for a deep, contextual understanding of OIM practice across sample firms, making viable, to some degree, the transferability that enables the findings to be generalised to situations with similar characteristics and parameters (Ashworth, 2008). Put differently, readers are able to resonate with the context-bonded findings, which are facilitated by rich descriptions, and decide if such resonances result in positive outcomes in their own situations (Ashworth, 2003; 2008).

Data saturation is also a fundamental element in conducting case studies. The notion of theoretical saturation derives from Glaser & Strauss’s (1967) widely known interpretation of grounded theory. In the study, theoretical saturation is defined as ‘*a process in which the researcher continues to sample relevant cases until no new theoretical insights are being gleaned from the data*’ (Bryman, 2014: p. 18). Once the data is saturated, the researcher moves on to a research question emerging from the collected data and then sampling theoretically in terms of that question (Bryman, 2014). This is also compounded by the concept of ‘*good fit*’ (Gummeson, 2000: p.

93), since researchers, from an economical perspective, normally have little interest in seeking further cases '*when the marginal utility of an additional case approaches zero*' (Gummesson, 2000: p. 96). Thus, as Gummesson (2003) suggests, it is difficult to determine the number of cases that are required to draw a conclusion. Also, some of the perspectives towards saturation are conflicting. For example, Bryman (2016) indicates that the minimum number of interviews needs to be between twenty and thirty for an interview-based qualitative study to be published. Nevertheless, Gerson and Horowitz (2002: p. 223) argues that '*fewer than 60 interviews cannot support convincing conclusions and more than 150 produce too much material to analyse effectively and expeditiously*'. As a result, there is no consensus over what is determined as the minimum requirement and it is unsurprising to find that sample size varies significantly across different qualitative studies. For instance, Mason (2010) found out that the number of interviews taken by doctoral theses across the UK and Ireland ranges from 1 to 95. Besides, Bryman (2016) also reports that the sample size of 50 empirical studies (i.e. they are all based on grounded theory) varies between 5 and 350. These examples collectively demonstrate that findings are not always legitimised through a large sample. As Barnes et al. (2004) posits, it is applicable to generate theories from only a limited number of cases. In qualitative management studies, it is recommended that a number between 4 and 12 serves well the purpose of theory building (Carson et al., 2001). In this study, as specified in **Section 5.4.2.3**, a total of 8 interviews were conducted. Given the reasons discussed above, the number of interviews were considered sufficient for achieving the corresponding research objective.

To conclude, determining the number of cases relies upon comparison, a process where SMEs are purposefully selected to represent different facets of the realities.

Such a process is extensively known as ‘purposive sampling’ (Ashworth, 2008). In doing so, saturation is gained by consolidating and extending the initial findings (yielded from the initial cases) of the research with additional empirical evidence provided by alternative cases (Carson et al., 2001). The present study adopts a purposive sampling approach to select sample firms for the multiple-case study and this approach will be specified in *Section 4.4.3*.

#### **4.4.2.3 Qualitative Case Study: Validity & Credibility**

Validity and credibility are terms derived from the notion of ‘reflection of reality’ that is constantly sought by positivists (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008; Burr, 2015). However, constructivist studies, which are centred on ‘social construction of reality’, have developed an alternative terminology including quality and trustworthiness to address the concept of ‘scientific rigor’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stenbacka, 2001; Davies & Dodd, 2002). In a similar vein, Davies & Dodd (2002) argue that this ‘scientific rigor’ in qualitative studies should be dependent upon the subjectivity, reflexivity and social interaction of interviewing, rather than the acknowledgement of biases (i.e. inaccuracy). Also, as Leedy & Ormrod (2015) state, the validation of socially constructed data can become problematic since there is no consensus among researchers over how to address the issue of validity and reliability. In this regard, McMillan & Schumacher (2006) ascertain that validity signals the extent to which the researcher’s interpretation of the explored phenomenon reflects the reality and they believe that constantly readjusting the sampling and data collection techniques during the data collection period helps increase validity. Further, Cresswell & Miller (2000) propose that in social constructivist studies, at least one of the following three strategies should be adopted for a study to be deemed credible: 1) disconfirming

evidence (i.e. to investigate multiple perspectives); 2) in-field engagement (i.e. trust-building); and 3) a thick, rich description (i.e. convincing details of different layers). The present study is heavily relied upon these three strategies in order to ‘*reflect the phenomenon of interest*’ (Pervin, 1984: p. 48) as 1) the present study has yielded findings alternative to what the existing literature had suggested (e.g. the present SME literature indicates that SMEs lack professionals in their top management team (Storey & Greene, 2010), whilst it is revealed in **Chapter 5** that professionalism is one of the major impressions projected sample firms online); 2) the researcher was able to establish rapport with sample firms and hence allowed access to multiple data sources (i.e. websites and archives, social media platforms, and interviews) upon which thick descriptions of the investigated phenomenon was based; and 3) the present study has produced well-contextualised findings that involve rich details and thus has increased the applicability of the findings to other similar settings. These three strategies will be reflected in **Chapter 8** (e.g. triangulation between the findings based on secondary data and primary data in the discussion chapter) as ‘*validity refers not to the data but to the inferences drawn*’ (Creswell & Miller, 2000: p. 124).

In qualitative studies, multiple data sources are frequently used to secure the validity and reliability of the research. Bashir et al. (2008) state that a study can be validated if the researcher is deeply engaged in the field and collects data from multiple sources to corroborate findings. Thus, it can be inferred that using different data sources will help yield more credible, reliable, and valid construction of realities than depending on a single method. In resonance with the above discussion, multiple data sources were used to ensure validity and credibility in the present study. Three datasets were established including SMEs’ manifestos (i.e. archive data), social media postings (i.e. observation of social media activities) and key informant interviews (i.e. interviews of

SMEs’ social media practitioners). The process for collecting and analysing the datasets will be elaborated in the next section.

#### 4.4.3 Sampling

The present study adopted a purposive sampling strategy to identify the sample firms that had potentially rich data in constructing a deep understanding of the phenomenon related to SMEs’ OIM practice on social media (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Purposive sampling relies upon the judgement of the researcher to select the most productive sample to answer the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following section provides a detailed description and justification of how the cases were selected in the present study.

Before mapping out the sampling strategy adopted by the present study, it is essential to define what a sampling frame is. A sampling frame is defined as the ‘*listing of population units from which a sample is chosen*’ (Parasuraman, 1991: p. 474). The sampling frame of this study consists of UK-based SMEs enrolled in a database titled ‘FAME’. This database covers all the companies registered in the UK and Ireland and reveals a full range of information regarding these companies (e.g. financials, personnel, and corporate structure). Also, it enables application of different criteria to refine the search (e.g. size, industry, and region). To yield an eligible sample, three criteria were applied in FAME as detailed in *Table 15*:

***Table 15: Search Results (Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2017)***

| FAME database – UK SIC (2007)                                   |               |
|---|---------------|
| Criteria  | Search Result |
| All active companies (not in receivership nor dormant)          | 3,822,517     |
| Number of Employees (1 - 249)                                   | 167,025       |
| Government Region: North West                                   | 7,743         |
| Industry Code: 90 – Creative, Arts and Entertainment Activities | 103           |
| Total   | 103           |

Firstly, parameters for delimitating the size of the sample firms were set at ‘1 to 249’, which corresponded to the UK-based definition of SMEs (UK’s Companies Act, 2006). This study employed a statistical criterion to define SMEs for the following reasons: 1) headcount is comparatively simple to apply and is extensively adopted by multiple types of SME analyses especially reports made by regulatory bodies such as the Small Business Service (SBS) and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI); 2) it draws a clear line between SMEs and large firms and hence little ambiguity is allowed; 3) there is no universally accepted non-quantitative categorisation of SMEs; and 4) some of the non-quantitative definitions of SMEs entail additional information which is often inaccessible to non-members such as the owner’s contribution in the operating capital of an SME (Schaper et al., 2014).

Secondly, this study focused on ‘creative industries’ in order to select proper cases for the investigated phenomenon. Creative industries are defined as ‘*those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property*’ (DCMS, 2001). By this definition, sub-industries include design, music, performing arts, visual arts, etc. Reasons why this particular group of industries were selected are 1) the UK has the largest creative sector across Europe and the largest around the globe relative to GDP (Bakhshi, Freeman, & Higgs, 2012). According to UNESCO (2013), it is the most successful exporter of cultural goods and services and the UK government has taken a leading role in mapping out the creative economy; 2) creative industries in the UK are populated by a large number of SMEs and only a few large companies (Chaston, 2008; Dyer-Witthford & dePeuter, 2009); and 3) companies within creative industries are often beneficiaries of social media adoption as the importance of digital social networks in creative production and



consumption has been widely acknowledged (Nesta, 2017). In the FAME database, one code is central to the above definition of creative industries: Creative, arts and entertainment activities (code 90). Given what was observed in the data immersion period, a large number of the firms under this category are beneficiaries of social media adoption (i.e. proactive presence on different social media platforms), and hence they were regarded as eligible subjects for the present study.

Finally, this study selected SMEs within the geographical region of Northwest of England since this region has 5 of the UK's creative clusters and one of the key 'creative conurbations' that are deemed to steer the UK's creative economy (Mateos-Garcia & Bakhshi, 2016). Within this region, Creative clusters in Liverpool and Manchester (i.e. where all the companies in the final sample are established) are respectively marked as 'high growth' (i.e. the number of creative companies in this cluster has been increasing rapidly) and 'high concentration' (i.e. the bulk of the companies spreading over a variety of different sub-sectors are centralised in the area) (Nesta, 2017). Thus, choosing this region was thought to provide a relatively comprehensive portrayal of the landscape of the UK's creative industries and hence make a representative initial sample. In addition, the region was also selected due to convenience (i.e. it was convenient for the researcher to approach sample firms as the researcher was living in the region). In the UK, location was not found as a critical enabler of social media adoption. Coupled with the fact that generalisation is not regarded as the main focus of the present study, convenient-purposive sampling does not add threat to the validity of the findings (Patton, 1990).

The sampling process yielded 103 firms with all the above criteria applied as the initial sample. The next step was to review and screen the social media platforms of those

sample firms for suitability. In general, 'FAME' database provides a link to the official website of each individual case (with several exceptions that no link was provided; for these cases, their names were searched online to find out whether they had official websites). Through this link, the official website of each case was visited. The official website of a case normally provides a link to each of the firm's social media accounts (i.e. the link normally sits at the top right or the bottom left corner of the homepage). In doing so, the social media accounts of each case were visited and the social media presence of each case was confirmed.

The research design of this thesis entails sample firms with rich archival data and willingness to grant incisive interviews with key personnel. Thus, the final sample of the present study should conform to the following criteria: 1) sample firms must have an active online presence, meaning that they must have an official website and at least one social media account that has been regularly updated (i.e. to ensure the richness of the secondary data for **Phase 1** and **Phase 2**); 2) sample firms' online presence (i.e. firm manifestos collected from official websites and social media postings) must embody elements pertaining to OIM, which could be thematised to bespeak organisational impressions (**RQ1**) and OIM strategies (**RQ2**) (i.e. to ensure the quality of data analysis); 3) sample firms must be willing to grant access to data of different sources (i.e. to ensure the feasibility of the research); and 4) sample firms must have at least one member of staff (i.e. the practitioner who is in charge of managing social media activities on behalf of his/her company) who is willing to give informed consent to take part in the research (i.e. to ensure the richness of the primary data for **Phase 3**).

The screening process started with examining the social media accounts of each of the 103 firms in search of firms that had an active online presence (i.e. regularly updated website and social media accounts). It turned out that only 76 cases were active on social media. The next step was to examine the information posted on the official website and social media accounts of these 76 cases in order to identify firms that had practised OIM online (i.e. social media was not solely used for display of products). As a result, 53 cases were selected. Then, the researcher sent each of the 53 firms an interview request by email. Firstly, the researcher resent the ones that agreed to take part in the research with the participant information sheet and asked for their informed consent (i.e. to notify them that a consent form must be signed off by each one of them). For those that rejected the initial request, the researcher marked them in a list of potential targets and replied in a second attempt to convince them to participate. For those non-respondents, the researcher resent the interview request by email and also through social media platforms (i.e. indicated on their official website, for instance, the interview request was sent through Messenger, an appliance for sending messages on Facebook, hoping that this could make the non-respondents aware of the request). The second round yielded several more participants that were willing to take part. For those that were still reluctant to contribute, the researcher thanked them and crossed them off the list of potential targets. For those that were still yet to offer a reply, the researcher resent the interview request for the final time, trying to draw their attention. The third round was basically about checking whether there was any reply from those non-respondents of the first two rounds. Finally, each case that agreed to contribute was again examined thoroughly if they conformed to the four criteria listed above. As a result, these criteria combined together finally narrowed the choice to 8 out of 53 firms that were selected as the final sample (i.e. the other 45 firms either

claimed that they were too busy to facilitate the interview request or never replied). It is worth noting that some of the 8 companies were reluctant to participate in the first place. Since they were highly eligible for the current research, the researcher asked if the participants that were already interviewed could help convince them to accept the invitation. For instance, the researcher asked the interviewee of **C4** if she knew the social media practitioners of any other listed companies. Fortunately, **C4** collaborated with **C5** once and hence the interviewee of **C4** finally helped to successfully gain the consent of **C5**'s practitioner for an interview. Thus, this was a viable approach for selecting cases. Overall, a total of 8 firms were selected and *Table 16* summarises the characteristics of sample firms.

**Table 16: Description of Sample Firms**

| Sample Firms             | Artistic Domain* <sup>1</sup>                    | Core Programme (Main Activities)                         | Venue for service* <sup>2</sup>  | Size* <sup>3</sup> | Year Founded* <sup>4</sup> | Social Media Platforms   |
|--------------------------|--|--|--|--------------------|----------------------------|--|
| <b>C1</b> * <sup>5</sup> | Education of arts                                | Provision of artistic training for emerging artists      | Rehearsal rooms  | Micro (3)          | 1988                       | Facebook<br>Twitter<br>YouTube<br>SoundCloud   |
| <b>C2</b>                | Puppetry   | Theatrical plays based around handmade puppets and masks | Theatre (100 seats); Sound-proofed studio; meeting room (10 people)            | Micro (6)          | 1978                       | Facebook<br>Twitter<br>YouTube<br>Instagram  |
| <b>C3</b>                | Performing arts                                  | Theatrical plays for social change                       | Rehearsal space  | Micro (7)          | 2004                       | Facebook<br>Twitter<br>LinkedIn  |
| <b>C4</b>                | Contemporary visual arts                         | Host of an art-led biennial festival                     | None   | Small (15)         | 1998                       | Facebook<br>Twitter<br>Instagram   |
| <b>C5</b>                | Technology-related arts such as films and videos | Media and visual arts through creative technologies      | Building with built-in cinema screens  | Small (33)         | 1989                       | Facebook<br>Twitter<br>YouTube<br>Instagram<br>Vimeo<br>LinkedIn<br>Pinterest<br>Artplayer |
| <b>C6</b>                | Contemporary arts                                | Exhibitions of contemporary arts                         | Building with built-in galleries   | Medium (53)        | 1988                       | Facebook<br>Twitter  |
| <b>C7</b>                | Theatrical Plays                                 | Production of plays and operation of a theatre           | Theatre (390 seats); Studio; Educational suite                                 | Medium (87)        | 1966                       | Facebook<br>Twitter<br>YouTube<br>Instagram  |
| <b>C8</b>                | Classical music                                  | Musical performance and musical education                | Auditorium (1700 seats); Recording and rehearsal space; Music room (80 people) | Medium (202)       | 1906                       | Facebook<br>Twitter  |

\*<sup>1</sup> this was derived from the trade description in the FAME database (accessed 11/04/2017).

\*<sup>2</sup> this was gathered from each firm's official website.

\*<sup>3</sup> this was gathered from the number of employees in the FAME database (accessed 11/04/2017).

\*<sup>4</sup> this was gained from the Companies House (accessed 16/05/2017) and this figure refers to the year the company was incorporated by the Companies House.

\*<sup>5</sup> to ensure the anonymity of the research subjects, sample firms were coded as **C1** to **C8**.

A more specific description of each case (i.e. extracted from each case's website) outlined in *Table 16* is provided below in order for the readers to better understand the sample. Nonetheless, the following case description entails no substantial details to avoid leaking the identity of the sample firms.

**C1** is a Liverpool-based micro firm specialising in performing arts. Often in collaboration with some of the UK's renowned artists and performers, **C1** is primarily dedicated to making outdoor theatrical plays. Also, the firm is known for providing professional development and artistic training for emerging artists (i.e. especially young adults), in order to help forge their careers such as securing their employment with arts-based organisations, and marginalised communities and vulnerable individuals, with the aim to improve the standards of community arts and the wellbeing of the overall society. Additionally, **C1** offers a wide range of bespoke acts (i.e. different forms of outdoor arts or training sessions) that caters to the theme of customers' own events or festivals.

**C2** is a micro firm based in Rossendale, Lancashire. The firm's work retains emphasis on visual storytelling through the form of hand-made puppetry, mask work and animation. **C2's** venue (i.e. a theatre) houses a varied programme of work, including hosting national and international shows to Rossendale, runs music nights, films, workshops, and training courses, among which the firm is renowned for its family-oriented programme and an annual puppet festival. The family-oriented programme is underpinned by story installations tailor-made for young families (i.e. parents and their babies and toddlers) featuring interactive theatre such as puppetry, lights,

projections, and live music. Furthermore, **C2** also produces small shows that are performed in public places across Rossendale such as nurseries, libraries and village halls in order to engage with the local communities.

**C3** is a Liverpool-based micro firm that produces performing arts themed around social issues. Their work is mainly anchored in four areas: 1) theatrical productions and events that tackle and stimulate debate on social concerns such as homelessness in the UK; 2) participatory programmes, in which participants are able to develop relevant knowledge and skills about theatre and engage with like-minded others; 3) research projects, in which scholars are invited to explore the relationship between theatre and social change (e.g. conferences); and 4) training sessions, which aim to facilitate the participatory programmes, in collaboration with other arts institutions. Also, **C3**'s pro-social pursuit is exemplified by its theatrical productions as often being delivered in partnership with local communities, its participatory programmes as seeking to connect with local interest, and its research projects as being conducted at grass roots level.

**C4** is a small firm specialising in contemporary arts in Liverpool. It is widely known for hosting a biennial arts festival, consisting of a series of events of different themes, with the participation of local, national, and international artists and organisations. This biennial arts festival involves a vast array of forms of contemporary arts including installations, sculptures, paintings, exhibitions, which often take place in unusual locations such as public streets and abandoned factories. **C4** is also underpinned by a programme of commissions and education. The former represents the firm's contribution in presenting a large number of new artworks from around the globe, whereas the latter is illustrated by the firm's provision of family workshops, free learning resources, and sustained partnership with Liverpool schools.

**C5**, (i.e. medium firm) located in Liverpool, is one of the UK's leading media arts organisation, providing a programme of exhibitions, movies, and participatory art projects, which are prevalently themed around creative technology. The major work undertaken by **C5** is threefold: 1) artistic programme features the commission of new media and digital artworks from many acclaimed artists; 2) participatory programme organises activities for local communities, disadvantaged individuals, and youngsters to explore creative technology, art and film; and 3) research & innovation programme is underpinned by the collaboration with organisations across the creative industries, higher education, and arts sectors to create multi-disciplinary projects exploring the linkage between technology and art. Moreover, the building in which **C5** is based has facilities that might attract visitors including galleries (showing at least four exhibitions per year), an art film cinema with four screens (showing selectively independent and mainstream movies), and a café & bar (serving beverages and snacks).

**C6** is a medium firm based in Liverpool. The firm manages an award-winning art gallery presenting a sustained programme of creative exhibitions and specialises in varied art genres including visual art, music, dance, live art and literature. Also, **C6** offers a community-oriented participatory programme featuring a set of family craft activities. In addition to its own productions, the building run by **C6** has historic values (e.g. listed as UNESCO world heritage) and an enriched history of exhibiting multi-genre artworks created by many renowned artists. It currently houses over 30 creative industries including artists, graphic designers, small arts organisations, craftspeople and retailers, making it a creative hub through collaborated practice to attract visitors.

**C7** is a theatre (i.e. medium firm) based in Bolton. The firm's main on-stage productions include comedies, new plays, musicals, dramas, and historical retellings. Its off-stage activities, with the aim of developing stories of others, range from storytelling sessions for toddlers to drama groups for elders. Despite its work delivered on-site, which is facilitated by its venue consisting of a workshop, a studio, a wardrobe department, a prop store, a rehearsal space, a lab and a main auditorium, **C7** also develops participatory programmes that aim to nurture young talents and it includes an annual festival that showcases original works created by novice theatre makers, a writing session that encourages local emerging writers to share their scripts, and a theatre training session that helps youngsters to gain relevant knowledge and skills. Furthermore, **C7** offers educational programmes which mainly include the provision of bespoke education sessions for both primary and secondary schools, and the partnership with a local university to create a new BA (Hons) theatre degree.

**C8** is a Liverpool-based medium firm specialising in classic music. The firm is best known for its award-winning professional symphony orchestra which extensively tours throughout the UK and internationally. Also, concerts of **C8**'s orchestra are often aired on national media and recordings are sold nationwide. Besides, **C8**'s venue is available for professional hire in terms of hosting concerts of external musicians. Moreover, **C8** also provides a series of programmes to engage with the local communities, featuring music performance to combat social exclusion; youth development, featuring training sessions and school concerts for young musicians to hone their skills; and music education, featuring creative music making workshops for children.

#### **4.4.4 Data Collection**



Data collection is defined as the process of gaining and gauging information on targeted variables in a systematic manner, which is intended to generate answers to predetermined questions and assess outcomes (Kempster & Cope, 2010). Consequently, to answer the research questions specified in the beginning of this chapter, the present study is based on data collected from three sources: firm manifestos, social media postings, and key informant interviews. This section provides an elaborate description of how each of these three datasets was established.

#### **4.4.4.1 Firm Manifestos (Phase 1)**

Data collection process commenced with gathering firm manifestos from the official website of each firm in the final sample in order to understand what desired organisational impressions were projected online. Here, a manifesto denotes each company's self-reflection on its goal, mission, vision, value, history and work theme which are normally publicized under the section titled 'about us' and other equivalents such as 'heritage' and 'how we work'. In other words, a firm manifesto is a comprehensively orchestrated statement that summarises the key elements listed above. It is an integral constituent of a company's website and it contains background information for anyone who shows interest in the company. Hence, it is believed that a manifesto also helps project sample firms' desirable images to their target audiences online. The specific procedures of how the data was collected are listed below:

- 1) Visited each firm's official website;
- 2) Clicked on 'about us' or any equivalent section which usually sit on the top left of the homepage;

- 3) Cut and pasted the text (i.e. including titles, sub-titles, and paragraphs) displayed on the page onto a word file which was later labelled as the manifesto script. One manifesto script was created for each case.
- 4) In most occasions, a manifesto was segmented into multiple sub-sections and each one of them solely showcased a different aspect of the firm such as ‘our history’, ‘our work’, and ‘what we do’. These sub-sections were all taken into account. However, in some rare occasions, the firm had already produced a copy of manifesto for others to download (e.g. **C3**). In this regard, a PDF version of the pre-written manifesto was downloaded and converted into a word file.
- 5) A total of 8 Word files were created and stored securely in the University’s ‘M’ drive for further analysis.

**Table 17** outlines the basic information pertaining to each sample firm’s manifesto:

***Table 17: Manifestos of Sample Firms***

| Company   | Sources of manifesto (where it was found)   | Forms of documentation                     | Elements of content  | Word count |
|-----------|---|--|--|------------|
| <b>C1</b> | ‘Act’<br>‘What We Do’ (under ‘above us’)  | Web text                                   | Organisational fundamentals*, aims, commitment, and alignment  | 1,002      |
| <b>C2</b> | ‘How It All Began’<br>‘FAQs’  | Web text                                   | Organisational fundamentals, history, management, mission, commitment, and future plans  | 880        |
| <b>C3</b> | ‘Our Work’<br>‘About Us’  | Web text<br>Downloadable<br>PDF document   | Organisational fundamentals, creed, and guiding principles on art, social change, ethics, evaluation, performance, and development | 1,414      |
| <b>C4</b> | ‘About’<br>‘Intro’  | Web text                                   | Organisational fundamentals, and commitment  | 217        |
| <b>C5</b> | ‘About’<br>‘History of [C5]’  | Web text                                   | Organisational fundamentals, mission, achievements, and history  | 716        |
| <b>C6</b> | ‘About Us’<br>‘Heritage’  | Web text                                   | Organisational fundamentals, values, commitment, achievements, development, history, and heritage                                  | 1,583      |
| <b>C7</b> | ‘The [C7] Story’ (under ‘About Us’)<br>‘Get Involved’   | Web text                                   | Organisational fundamentals, values, commitment, work themes, beliefs and goals  | 1,355      |
| <b>C8</b> | ‘Our History’<br>‘Our Sponsors and Partners’<br>‘Nurturing Talent’<br>‘Music Education for All Ages’<br>‘Hire Our Spaces’<br>‘Life Changing Music Making’<br>‘Annual Review’ (all under ‘About Us’) | Web text with<br>hyperlinks<br>embedded in | Organisational fundamentals, history, commitment, values, alignment, mission, vision, belief and achievements                      | 2,342      |

\*Organisational fundamentals in this case refers to general descriptions of what the company specialises in and what it offers to the general public such as its products, services, programmes, projects, and events.

#### **4.4.4.2 Social Media Postings (Phase 2)**

It is suggested that organisations, with the purpose of achieving a number of strategic objectives, are empowered to shape desired impressions by carefully constructing social media postings (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013). Thus, a second data source was adopted in **Phase 2** – social media postings – which was intended to capture how sample firms strategized OIM on social media. In this case, social media postings refer to a variety of artefacts which are textual (e.g. tweets), graphic (e.g. photos posted on Instagram), and visual (e.g. videos shared on Facebook), which were observable from social media platforms. Additionally, hyperlinks embedded in texts were also included because despite that they basically take the form of highlighted texts or pictures which are already part of a post, the content they lead to is also a source of OIM (e.g. SMEs expect their audiences to click on hyperlinks to be directed to a more detailed intro of the coming events due to character limit on social media, see McCann & Barlow, 2015 for details). According to Kaplan & Harnlein (2010), textual messages that were broadcasted to followers were prioritised among the aforementioned multimedia content. Thus, such a scope of social media postings enabled the researcher to pin down a wide range of elements (multi-layered) that could comprehensively reflect sample firms' OIM performance on social media.

It is noteworthy that only social media platforms updated on a weekly basis (i.e. at least one post per week) were incorporated for analysis. Kozinets (2010: p.63) articulates a few criteria to gauge the eligibility of social media postings for qualitative research, among which the most notable one is '*more detailed or descriptively rich data*'. Therefore, to secure the richness of the data, social media platforms that were

updated less frequently than on a weekly basis were excluded. Other platforms such as Vimeo, Sound Cloud, and YouTube were used only for certain projects and hence these platforms were not continuously updated after the finalisation of the projects. As a result, these project-based platforms were excluded from the analysis of social media postings.

The data was collected from social media postings that were published from 1<sup>st</sup> Jun. 2016 to 30<sup>th</sup> Apr. 2017 (i.e. 8 months in total). This 11-month period was a reasonable time span in which at least one major programme and one sub-project for each firm took place (i.e. peak time for posting) and the commencement, continuation, and completion of such activities were explicitly reflected from the firm's social media postings. Besides, this 11-month period also encapsulated the 'off-season' period for business when no major programme took place so that postings irrelevant to major business promotions (i.e. relatively 'quieter' time period in which the firms did not bombard their audiences with a large volume of major promotions) could be included as well. Therefore, such a length of time served to paint a relatively comprehensive picture of SMEs' OIM practice on social media. In summary, **Table 18** outlines the scope of social media postings collected for analysis:

**Table 18: Dataset for Analysis of Social Media Postings**

| Sample Firm | Examined social media platforms  | No. of major programmes within the data collection period | No. of sub-projects within the data collection period* |
|-------------|----------------------------------|---|--|
| C1          | Facebook<br>Twitter              | 1   | 5  |
| C2          | Facebook<br>Twitter<br>Instagram | 2   | 8  |
| C3          | Facebook<br>Twitter              | 4   | 6  |
| C4          | Facebook<br>Twitter<br>Instagram | 2   | 59   |
| C5          | Facebook<br>Twitter<br>Instagram | 5   | 62   |
| C6          | Facebook<br>Twitter              | 11  | 187  |
| C7          | Facebook<br>Twitter<br>Instagram | 10  | 11   |
| C8          | Facebook<br>Twitter              | 8   | 168  |

\*the number of major programmes and sub-projects was determined by visiting the relevant sections of each firm's official website (e.g. 'past projects') and their Facebook Events which was employed by the firms to promote their programmes and projects.

It is worth noting that screenshots were used to document the social media postings that were reckoned to convey themes pertaining to OIM strategies. Each firm's screenshots were pasted onto a word file and securely stored in the University's 'M' drive for subsequent analysis.

#### **4.4.4.3 Key Informant Interviews (Phase 3)**

The final phase of data collection featured a series of in-depth interviews with the purpose of identifying the organisational qualities affecting sample firms' OIM practice on social media. A total of 8 interviews (i.e. one for each firm) were conducted and these interviews were semi-structured to allow for flexibility. Specifically, the researcher had opportunities to pursue a line of discussion opened up by the interviewee and hence a dialog that led to unexpected findings ensued during an interview.

In terms of selecting proper interviewees, it is suggested that specialists with rich, in-field experience should be prioritised in qualitative studies so that insights regarding

the focal phenomenon can be drawn from the data (Johnson & Weller, 2002). In a similar vein, Gummesson (2003: p. 490) emphasises that ‘*there is a wealth of information stored in the minds of people who have lived through important events with unique access*’. Consequently, the selection of key informants was based upon three criteria: 1) interviewees must be given the duty of running social media accounts on behalf of their firms (i.e. to ensure that interviewees have deep, first-hand knowledge regarding managing social media activities); 2) interviewees must have authority or autonomy, to some degree, in deciding the day-to-day content shared on social media (i.e. to ensure that interviewees are able to reflect upon what affect OIM practice conveyed through the social media activities); 3) interviewees must be willing to share their knowledge and experiences (i.e. to ensure the informed consent is gained). Following these three criteria, 8 social media practitioners (i.e. one for each company) were selected as the eligible interviewees and **Table 19** outlines the personal profile of the interviewees.

**Table 19: Profile of the Interviewees**

| Informant | Job Title                                   | Duty   | Tenure               | Duration of Interview (minutes) | No. of Interview Transcript Pages |
|-----------|---|--|----------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| C1        | Creative director                           | 1) Running social media accounts   | 3 years and 2 months | 80                              | 32                                |
|           |   | 2) Directing shows   |                      |                                 |                                   |
| C2        | Social media manager                        | 1) leading outreach projects for the community around the venue  | 7 years              | 101                             | 44                                |
|           |   | 2) Running social media accounts   |                      |                                 |                                   |
| C3        | General manager                             | 1) Undertaking desk-based office work such as finances, and staff salaries   | 18 months            | 50                              | 24                                |
|           |   | 2) Running social media accounts   |                      |                                 |                                   |
| C4        | Marketing and communication officer         | 1) Managing public-facing communications including social media, website, press release, advertising and campaigns | 4 years              | 56                              | 21                                |
| C5        | Head of marketing, communication, and sales | 1) Leading the marketing and communication team  | 10 months            | 61                              | 26                                |
|           |   | 2) Managing external events, video   |                      |                                 |                                   |

|           |   |    |   |           |    |    |
|-----------|---|----|---|-----------|----|----|
|           |   |    | productions, and technology hires   |           |    |    |
| <b>C6</b> | Media and marketing manager                     | 1) | Overseeing public-facing materials including social media, website, e-shop, leaflets, press release and advertising | 14 months | 62 | 27 |
| <b>C7</b> | Press and digital officer                       | 1) | Managing day-to-day social media accounts   | 12 months | 68 | 32 |
| <b>C8</b> | Executive director of audiences and development | 1) | Managing fundraising, operations, maintenance, and box office   | 12 years  | 51 | 24 |
|           |   | 2) | Leading the marketing team  |           |    |    |

The interviews ranged from 50 minutes to 101 minutes in length. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and the interview transcripts had a total of 230 double-spaced pages. The interviewees were advised of the broad theme: ‘how do you (i.e. on behalf of the company) engage with audience on social media and how do you manage to impress your target audience with content shared on social media?’ The specific research questions were kept from the interviewees to minimise respondent bias and allow for the emergence of their stories (see Mason, 2018; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016 for details). In an attempt to capture the story of each interviewee, an interview guide was designed to entail four main sections. The first section embodies open-ended questions inquiring how the interviewees’ personal features (e.g. habits and previous experience) might have affected their management of social media postings. The second section is composed questions that enables the interviewees to elaborate on the features relating to the internal organisation of their companies that might have influenced sample firms’ OIM practice on social media. The third section concentrates on the features of social media platforms that may have impacted their firms’ OIM practice. The final section entails questions that are intended to investigate to which extent the informants understand OIM (e.g. whether making particular impressions are regarded as the motivation for SMEs’ social media management). It is worth noting that the informants revealed complementary

information that triggered questions to further explore the focal elements that were not estimated before the interview. Therefore, the key strength of the research design is that these interviews unveiled information that could not be encapsulated in the previous two datasets such as the interviewees' perceptions of OIM. Overall, as argued by Kumar, Stern, & Anderson (1993), the combination of the three datasets enabled a rich, insightful understanding of the phenomena and hence yielded relatively comprehensive, and robust findings pertaining to SMEs' OIM practice on social media.

#### **4.4.5 Data Analysis**

Data analysis is defined as a process of unfolding packages which intends to provide sense, reduce volume, identify trends and themes, and craft a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveals (Patton, 1990). This thesis employs a qualitative thematic analysis to analyse the data collected from firm manifestos, social media postings, and key informant interviews.

Thematic analysis, if defined in concise terms, is '*a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data*' (Braun & Clarke, 2006: p. 6). It not only orchestrates and depicts the dataset in rich detail, but also interprets diverse facets of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). Here, some claims that 'themes' are embedded in the data and they will 'emerge' during the analytical process (Rubin & Rubin, 1999). However, alternative thoughts have challenged the idea of 'emerging themes' by arguing that 'emerging' or 'being discovered' tends to deny the role of the researcher in identifying themes and reporting them to the readers (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). In a similar vein, Ely et al. (1997: p. 205) believe that themes '*reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them*'. Similar to the



latter argument, the thematic analysis used in the present study was akin to a constructivist epistemology where patterns/themes are socially produced and reproduced (Bruan & Clarke, 2006), making the whole process a co-creation of knowledge between the researcher and the researched.

In the present study, an in-depth thematic analysis for each dataset was initiated through the lens of the research questions as specified in the beginning of this chapter and firmly followed the procedures outlined in *Table 20*. Without subscribing to any theoretical preference or priori hypotheses, the researcher read all three datasets thoroughly to form sophisticated views of each case. The goal was, steered by the research questions, to identify the theoretical constructs, relationships, and patterns within each case. Drawing upon Miles & Huberman (1984), tables and graphs were utilised where necessary to facilitate the analyses. During the process, an understanding of OIM practice within each individual case was developed and connections among emerging categories were also identified and this led to the substantive patterns of the strategized OIM practice from the datasets.

***Table 20: Procedures of Thematic Analysis***

| Process of Analysis             | Level of Analysis              | Description of Analysis  |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Familiarisation/Gaining Insight | Repetitive reading of the data | Iterative reading of the collected data (i.e. manifestos, postings, and interview transcripts) to firstly obtain an initial understanding of the phenomenon, thereby laying the groundwork for the ‘data immersion’ stage (Senior, 2002). Memos were kept as reflections on the issues identified (Patton, 1990).  |
| Immersion and Sense-Making      | Diagnosis of the phenomenon    | During the process of immersion and sense-making, a thematic analysis was undertaken, where potentially theme-laden fragments were underlined (i.e. for analysis of manifestos and interview transcripts: texts were highlighted; for analysis of social media postings: posts were screenshotted and footnoted). Drawing upon Seidel & Kelle’s (1995) technique, initial codes were identified for each dataset and subsequently grouped to form certain classes (i.e. assemblages of codes with similar thematic meanings). So far, data reduction (i.e. data being reduced to certain classes) and data complication (i.e. creating new questions and interpretations for the data) were completed. |
| Categorisation                  | Developing within-case themes  | Process of searching for themes that builds upon the reflective notes (i.e. level 1: repetitive reading of the data) and initial/potential codes (i.e. level 2: Diagnosis of the phenomenon) was performed. At this stage, codes were examined to form firstly potential and subsequently overarching themes that were exclusive to a certain case in terms of OIM. The researcher also began pondering over the relationship  |

|   |                              |   |
|---|------------------------------|---|
|   |                              | between codes and themes. This stage yielded a number of candidate themes that were recorded in the notes.  |
| Association/Patten Recognition  | Developing cross-case themes | This stage focused on broader patterns across different cases. Themes were refined and the relationship between the coded data and proposed themes and between different levels of existing themes (i.e. themes and sub-themes) were clarified. Themes identified from each case were compared to discern similarities and discrepancies. This entailed expansion and revision of existing themes (i.e. existing themes may collapse into each other or be condensed into smaller units) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At the end, general and unique themes for all cases were included (Hycner, 1985).  |
| Interpretation/representation   | Writing up                   | This stage featured a formal process of 1) identifying the story of each theme and its significance and 2) writing up a narrative account of the interplay between the interpretative activity of the researcher and the participants' account of their experience in their own words, thereby allowing the data to speak for itself (Cope, 2005). The specific process involved defining, explaining, naming, contextualising, and integrating the collected themes with provision of a thick description which is supported by data excerpts. So far, nascent theoretical arguments (e.g. a taxonomy of OIM strategies) were formulated without revisiting relevant literature. |
| Explanation and Abstraction   | Enfolding literature         | This stage entailed a process of weaving back and forth between prior literature and data (Yanow, 2004), in which a theoretical explanation at a higher level of abstraction (Eisenhardt, 1989) was produced. Consequently, the findings were not only thematically grounded, but also interpretative and hermeneutic. The results of work at this stage is presented in the section titled 'discussion'.   |
| <i>Sources: adapted from Kempster &amp; Cope (2010: p. 15) and Braun &amp; Clarke (2006: p. 16)</i> |                              |   |

The next step was cross-case analysis, in which the insights drawn from each individual case were compared with those from other cases to identify consistent patterns and themes (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Key themes of OIM (i.e. **Phase 1**: organisational impressions; **Phase 2**: a taxonomy of OIM strategies; and **Phase 3**: organisational qualities affecting OIM practice) were grouped by variables of potential interest to facilitate comparisons and develop an overall empirical framework. It is worth noting that comparisons initially made between varied pairs of cases to identify common and differentiated features. Whilst certain patterns were identified, other cases were aggregated in search of further groupings of the similarities and discrepancies pertaining to different facets of the emergent theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Such a process was intended to develop more robust theoretical concepts and causal relations (Kempster & Cope, 2010; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The datasets were constantly revisited to enhance the researcher's understanding of, and therefore validate the conceptualisation of, the focal phenomenon in terms of the three research questions. An iterative process of weaving back and forth across theory, data, and

literature was undertaken to refine the findings, acknowledge the agreements and discrepancies with prior theories, and clarify the contributions of the present study. The findings yielded by the three datasets will be presented in the next chapter.

#### **4.4.6 Summary of Fieldwork**

To enable readers to develop a better understanding of how the methodology has been carried out, the six-stage fieldwork is specified below:

- 1) **Sampling**: screening SMEs and monitoring their social media activities to select proper cases;
- 2) **Phase 1**: collecting data from firm manifestos and analysing the collected data in order to identify SMEs' desired organisational images/impressions online (i.e. **RQ1**);
- 3) **Phase 2**: collecting data from social media postings and analysing the collected data in order to develop a taxonomy of OIM strategies employed by SMEs on social media (i.e. **RQ2**);
- 4) **Phase 3**: collecting data from key informant interviews and analysing the collected data in order to identify the organisational qualities affecting SMEs' OIM practice on social media (i.e. **RQ3**);
- 5) **Presenting the findings**; and
- 6) **Revisiting prior literature**: weaving back and forth between literature and findings and discussing how the findings of this study, which are specific to the specified settings, contributes to the existing body of knowledge.

## 4.5 Ethical Considerations

This empirical research is completely in accord with University of Liverpool's Academic Ethical Framework, and raises no specific ethical risks. The ethical issues involved with this research are outlined below:

**Informed Consent:** An ethical approval was obtained before the commencement of the interviews. The transparency regarding the aim, objectives, methodology, and findings of the present study was secured. Essential information regarding the present study was clearly communicated to the research participants as the researcher provided each participant with a copy of Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix) prior to the commencement of the interview. In doing so, the participants were fully aware that their participation were purely voluntary and they were allowed to withdraw from the study of their own free will. Also, a consent form was ticked and signed by each participant as the proof of the informed consent.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity:** Proper measures were taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of all the data collected. To eschew the information spillover, the names of sample firms and interviewees were encrypted (e.g. sample firms were coded from **C1** to **C8**) and any other information that might lead to the identification of the participants were anonymised using general, lay descriptions (e.g. the signature programme of a firm was encrypted as '[the core programme of **C1**]'). The interviews were securely recorded, transcribed, and stored (i.e. in the University of Liverpool's 'M drive').

**Authenticity:** The conclusion was drawn depending on the evidence gained from the research. No alteration was made to the analysis in order to endorse pre-conceived

theories. The collection and analysis of data were under scrutiny of the supervision team. All references were cited strictly following Harvard Referencing System and listed in an alphabetical sequence in the bibliography section. The intellectual property rights of all research participants and University of Liverpool were respected when disseminating and publishing the study.

**Participants' Access to Results:** During the course of the present study, only the researcher had access to the collected data. The findings were not used for commercial purposes and the finalised thesis was shared with all the participants.

Overall, this study adopts a qualitative multiple-case study approach featuring data collected from three sources: 1) firm manifestos; 2) social media postings; and 3) key informant interviews. Thus, the next three chapters respectively present the findings based on the data collected from these three sources.

## **CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS (ANALYSIS OF FIRM MANIFESTOS)**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the organisational impressions projected by SMEs online. As briefed in *Chapter 4*, firm manifestos were gathered from the official website of each selected firm to form the dataset. Then, the dataset, comprised of 8 firm manifestos, was thematised, adopting a thematic analysis approach, to yield findings to answer *RQ1*. Consequently, the findings suggest four major organisational impressions: Professional, Creative, Socially Responsible, and Attractive. This chapter is structured by firstly providing an overview of how the themes and sub-themes were captured, grouped and synthesised. Secondly, it is presented by respectively defining, explaining, and exemplifying each major theme and its corresponding sub-themes. Finally, a summary is provided to outline the key findings in the analysis of firm manifestos.

### **5.2 Overview**

With the purpose of optimising the readers' comprehension of the findings, this section underpins how the themes were recorded, grouped, and synthesised.

During the period of categorisation and pattern recognition (see *Chapter 4* for details), the researcher intended to identify elements in relation to the desired organisational impressions. Given such an intent, a number of initial codes were generated and later grouped into several categories for each case (i.e. within-case themes). The following step was to compare and contrast between the codes and categories across different cases in search of common patterns (i.e. cross-case themes) and finally to form the four organisational impressions.

Initially, it occurred to the researcher that elements reflecting sample firms' excellence in what they tried to offer to their target audiences were prevalent in the raw data. These elements were mainly qualifications justifying how good they were in delivering organisational offerings. Some of these qualifications were inherently threefold: 1) some of them were basically a reflection of how sample firms' offerings would meet their customers' demands such as the provision of bespoke services and hence they were named 'quality of work'; 2) some of them were what sample firms had successfully accomplished especially those warranted by other institutions such as awards and therefore they were named 'achievements'; and 3) the rest of them were highly associated with sample firms' social networks, of which they tended to claim membership of a cohort formed by professionals in the same field, so that their work-centric excellence can be certified by simply being a part of the cohort and thus they were named 'quality of networks'. It is noteworthy that these three groups of elements all reflected more or less the 'quality' of different organisational attributes. Alternatively, some other elements were relatively more associated with the 'quantity' of organisational attributes. Specifically, such 'quantity' was addressed in two areas. Firstly, there were elements illustrating the varied forms of services/products provided by the firms to cater to different needs of their customers (e.g. multiple art genres), so that the outreach of their service/products can be increased. Meanwhile, other elements were found to exhibit sample firms' ability of handling a large volume of work in order to showcase their experience and proficiency (e.g. a large number of artwork commissions). Thus, the former was labelled as 'diversity', whereas the latter as 'capacity'. Overall, since these elements could be understood as qualifications that aimed to rationalise either the 'quality' or 'quantity', of sample firms' organisational offerings, they were collectively themed

as ‘professionalism’, meaning that they collectively represented sample firms’ intent to be perceived as professional (see *Section 5.3* for details).

Secondly, there was another group of elements that differentiated sample firms from others in the same industry. These elements were identified in three forms: 1) a series of vocabularies (e.g. words such as ‘unusual’, ‘distinctive’, etc.) indicating the distinctiveness of what sample firms attempted to offer to their target audiences. Such distinctiveness was also underpinned by claiming how their organisational offerings were differentiated from common practice in the industry. For instance, some claimed that their events were held in unusual places. Thus, these elements were named as ‘uniqueness of organisational offerings’; 2) many direct quotations were displayed to address the distinctiveness of sample firms’ organisational offerings or how sample firms highly valued creativity. These quotations were from the beneficiaries of such organisational offerings (e.g. participants of certain programmes such as artistic training sessions). Therefore, this group of elements was labelled as ‘creativity endorsed by external commentaries’. Finally, some elements were found to present sample firms as being a key part of a larger organisation, which is known for creativity. In doing so, sample firms could benefit from the association with, or recognition by, such an organisation, which had an established reputation of being creative. Hence, these elements were named as ‘alignment’. Overall, since all three groups of elements were fundamentally a reflection of sample firms’ intent of being viewed as creative, the overarching theme was named as ‘creativity’ (see *Section 5.4* for details).

Furthermore, the researcher identified that the examined manifestos normally incorporated a statement indicating sample firms’ positive attitude towards the wellbeing of the overall society. Some of the issues mentioned involved



homelessness, youth education, parenthood, social exclusion, and psychological wellbeing of the disabled or the marginalised. Such a statement often portrayed sample firms' organisational offerings as the tool to mitigate the aforementioned social issues. In doing so, their positive attitude towards those social issues were threefold: 1) elements featuring that sample firms self-claimed as being pro-social; 2) elements demonstrating that sample firms were committed to tackling the problems of the society; 3) elements indicating sample firms' priority of serving a particular type of disadvantaged people in society; and 4) elements signalling that sample firms were already recognised by others as being pro-social. Therefore, they were themed respectively as 'organisational value', 'organisational mission', 'audience targeting', and 'organisational identity'. Additionally, some of the sample firms chose to substantiate the activities they had done and how the disadvantaged benefited from their activities as the evidence of their contribution to fulfilling the stated pro-social pursuit. Such elements were named as 'positive outcome of pro-social activities'. Since all five groups of elements were themed around sample firms' pro-social pursuit, meaning that sample firms desired to be perceived as being socially responsible, they were synthesised as 'social responsibility' (see **Section 5.5** for details).

Finally, the examined manifestos exhibited a few traits that sample firms believed would appeal to their target audiences. These traits were firmly associated with their tangible resources that could be capitalised on in order to attract audiences. These resources were two-dimensional as on the one hand historical significance, aesthetics, and accessibility of sample firms' facilities were addressed to attract visitors, and on the other hand a number of vocabularies (e.g. words such as 'immersive', 'interactive', etc.) were frequently employed to underline a distinctive

trait of sample firms' facilities, namely, the ability to enhance immersive experience of audiences. It is worth highlighting that the latter was specific to facilities accommodating performing arts, especially theatrical plays as immersion was deemed invaluable when it came to this particular art genre. Consequently, the former was named as 'multidimensional traits of organisational facilities', whilst the latter as 'provision of immersive experience'. Since the aforementioned traits were intended to show the ability of sample firms' facilities in attracting audiences, the overall theme was synthesised as 'attractiveness' (see *Section 5.6* for details).

### **5.3 Professionalism**

The data indicates that sample firms are inclined to be perceived as professional in the eyes of their target audiences online. Here, Professionalism signals an SME's conduct, aims, or qualities that characterise the firm's competence expected out of its organisational offerings. Put differently, sample firms strive to articulate and justify their expertise and how this expertise meets the demand of their audiences and hence makes them stand out in the whole industry. As the data indicates, Professionalism is multifaceted and is comprised of five sub-themes: achievements, diversity, capacity, quality of work, and quality of networks/association. These sub-themes will be elaborated next.

#### **5.3.1 Achievements**

The data indicates that sample firms are inclined to illustrate and solidify the image of professionalism by showcasing tangible achievements they have managed to acquire. Here, it is worth highlighting that the term 'achievements' is twofold, which embodies 1) things such as awards and titles that are granted to the firm to demonstrate its authority in the industry; and 2) personal achievements of the internal members (i.e. past and present) of the firm that can be used to illustrate the firm's contribution to the

personal development of the associated personnel. Explicitly, the former is at an organisational level whereas the latter at an individual level. To be specific, ‘achievements’ at an organisational level is best typified by **C8**. In this case, with the purpose of straightforwardly addressing the artistic quality of its orchestra (i.e. the orchestra is **C8**’s most renowned organisational offering as it takes precedence in the introduction of the firm’s history – ‘Our History’), it discloses that the orchestra was granted ‘*[Major music recording award] of the Year 2009*’ (**C8**). It is clear that such an award can directly familiarise target audiences, even the ones who take no particular interest in classic music, with the standard and quality of the firm’s musical productions. In addition, **C8** also embellishes itself with a title to further define its musical repertoire from a historical perspective: ‘*The award-winning [C8’s] Orchestra is the UK’s oldest continuing professional symphony orchestra*’ (**C8**). It is believed that non-music fans can also resonate with the terms used in the sentence such as ‘oldest’ and ‘continuing’ and hence they are directly informed of **C8**’s position in the music industry. Given these two examples, awards and titles are believed to efficiently communicate the image of professionalism to an SME’s audiences.

‘Personal achievements’ is regarded as an alternative to ‘organisational achievements’. The rationale of presenting this type of achievements may be: 1) it is difficult for some SMEs to retain notable industrial awards or titles; and 2) the organisational offerings of some SMEs are centred on artistic training. A salient example that fits both contexts is **C1**. Unlike **C8** (i.e. a medium-sized firm that currently has 202 employees), **C1** is considerably smaller in scale (i.e. a micro firm that has only 3 regular members) and has a relatively shorter history (i.e. **C1** was founded in 1988 whilst **C8** was founded in 1906 and this means that **C1** is unlikely to benefit from its own historical heritage as much as **C8** does). Hence, judging by its

manifesto, the firm itself, or any of its productions, has obtained no significant industrial awards or noteworthy titles (i.e. titles that can directly pinpoint the firm's position in the industry or advantage against peers). Moreover, the firm features an artist-nurturing programme as an integral part of its daily operations. Therefore, professionalism is pinpointed when **C1** reveals the personal achievements of the former participants of the programme as follows:

*'Our artists have forged successful careers for themselves and secured employment with various organisations, including [a list of prestigious organisations in the art industry]'* (**C1**).

With the names of various renowned organisations in the art industry being specified, this is an unequivocal demonstration of the positive outcome of participating in the aforementioned training programme. Further, to enhance the image of professionalism, **C1** also offers evidence of former trainees having gained a stronger foothold in the art industry:

*'Many former ['C1ers'] have established award-winning companies, including [a list of prestigious organisations in the art industry]'* (**C1**).

In summary, 'personal achievements' is also deemed as an alternative, yet still efficient way to project the image of professionalism when 'organisational achievements' remains unattainable.

### **5.3.2 Diversity**

The data suggests that some of sample firms choose to address diversity as an indicator of professionalism. Diversity in this case can be reflected from 1) the range of work the firm undertakes; 2) the demographics of the firm's audience groups; and 3) the type of arts accommodated in the firm's venue. For instance, **C2** initially points out its ambition as aspiring to '*make work of world-class significance and to understand our work in a global context*' (**C2**). Here, 'world-class' and 'global context' are the

two phrases used to demonstrate professionalism in a way that the company strives to exert an international impact and hence make itself known beyond local communities. In order to make sense of how the company embarks on the theme of internationalism, the diversity of what it offers to the public is elaborated as follows:

*‘C2 hosts a rich and varied programme of work...It brings national and international shows to East Lancashire, and runs music nights, films, workshops and training courses in addition to its family orientated programme and an annual Puppet Festival’ (C2).*

As shown in the quote above, phrases including ‘varied’, and ‘national and international’, coupled with different types of the work undertaken by C2 (i.e. ‘*music nights, films...and an annual Puppet Festival*’), it is explicit that the company specialises in the multiform activities of national and international significance.

Secondly, C8 articulates the different demographics of its audience base as a way to project the image of professionalism. It is worth noting that the company’s most renowned offering – the Orchestra, retains overwhelming popularity among local residence (i.e. as discussed in *Section 5.3.1*). *Table 21* further stresses the Orchestra’s influence in larger contexts:

***Table 21: Demographics of C8’s Audience (the Orchestra)***

| <b>Demographics of Audience</b> | <b>Evidence</b>   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Local                           | <i>‘gives over seventy concerts each season in its home’</i>  |
| National                        | <i>‘makes regular appearances at the [national media] Proms... and concerts are frequently broadcast on [national media] Radio 3’</i>               |
| International                   | <i>‘continues to tour widely throughout the UK and internationally, most recently touring to [a list of countries across different continents]’</i> |

Therefore, it is implied that the Orchestra has drawn different types of audiences as the first mainly refers to local audience, the second national audience, and the third global audience. This is believed to enhance the image of professionalism as the

artistic quality and standard of the stated Orchestra has been, to some degree, universally appreciated.

Finally, diversity has also been captured in the narrative addressing different types of arts the firm has accommodated with. The example is given below:

*‘With international artists from rock, pop, folk and dance music include [a list of famous singers and music bands across different genres]’ (C8)*

The above quote showcases the venue’s ability to attract and host well-established artistic performance of diversified genres, and hence rationalise the self-claim, ‘[C8 is] *One of the UK’s premier arts and entertainment venues*’ (C8).

### **5.3.3 Capacity**

The third sub-theme, ‘capacity’, denotes sample firms’ endeavours to emphasize the amount of work they are capable of doing to accommodate customers so that their capabilities can be well understood. As the data indicates, this sub-theme is numeric-laden as figures have been extensively employed to explicitly and empirically make sense of the capacity the firms attempt to address. According to the data, this sub-theme is threefold, with the first facet articulating the quantity of commissions (i.e. this is subject to the firms that were mainly built up for commissioning artworks), the second underscoring the frequency of performances (i.e. this is mostly associated with the firms operating under the basis of renting out their venues to external promoters), and the third affirming the amount of beneficiaries of programmes (i.e. this is exclusive to participatory programmes). These three facets will be elaborated next.

The first facet is best typified by C5. The company initially portrays itself as ‘*the UK’s leading media arts centre*’ (C5). With the purpose of rationalising the term ‘leading’, C5 has chosen to showcase the number of renowned artworks it has commissioned:

*‘Our artistic programme has presented over 350 new media and digital artworks from artists including [a list of internationally renowned artists]’ (C5)*

Evidently, the figure ‘350’ is used to indicate the quantity of the company’s commission whereas the list of acclaimed names is used to indicate the artistic quality of the commission, since ‘350’ is not shockingly large number (i.e. audiences might be clueless of ‘how many’ commissions are regarded as ‘large’, so it probably makes more sense of the figure if it is suggested that most of the commissioned artworks have been created by artists with an international calibre).

**C8** is an excellent example to address the frequency of its performances. First, the image of professionalism lies with how the company depicts its signature organisational offering – the Orchestra. It is ascertained that the Orchestra *‘gives over seventy concerts each season in its home’ (C8)*. Since ‘over seventy concerts’ during each season (i.e. commonly known as less than 12 months) at **C8**’s own venue (i.e. excluding number of concerts during tours) is considered a relatively large number, this figure is likely to hint the popularity of the Orchestra, at least in the region where the company is established. Second, the venue that hosts the bulk of **C8**’s musical performances is also regarded as the main domain where professionalism emerges. In the narrative that is adopted to introduce the venue, it is firstly embellished as *‘One of the UK’s premier arts and entertainment venues’ (C8)* and this embellishment is subsequently validated by addressing the professionalism embedded in the venue’s capacity to accommodate musical performances as follows: *‘[C8’s venue] presents more than 400 concerts and events...annually’ (C8)*. This figure indicates that on average more than one concert or event takes place at the venue per day and hence the venue can be empirically ascertained as overwhelmingly popular in terms of being a place for music-centric entertainment.

Finally, numeric-laden evidence has also been provided to verify **C8**'s capacity in its educational programmes. Similarly, the company's major learning programme is portrayed as '*a national leader in its field in its quality, reach and impact on our communities*' (**C8**). To further substantiate what it is meant by 'reach', the company presents evidence that '*over 23,000 children from across the North West*' (**C8**) have participated in the child-oriented programme. To validate its precedence in 'quality and impact', the company discloses that the involved musicians '*provide over 2,000 sessions each year and the programme has benefited over 10,000 service users since it began*' (**C8**). In doing so, the image of professionalism is empirically validated with astonishing numbers being provided.

#### 5.3.4 Quality of Work

The fourth sub-theme is centred on the quality of SMEs' organisational offerings. It has been identified that quality of work is predominantly presented through 1) a wide range of bespoke services; 2) multiple in-place facilities; and 3) renowned personnel to secure the quality of the organisational productions. A notable example is **C1**. In the firm's manifesto, high quality within its tailor-made services are proclaimed to be the firm's essential attribute:

*'All our work is created with high production values...we have a number of acts for you to choose from and we are also able to create bespoke work, tailored to the theme of your event or festival'* (**C1**).

In order to make sense of what it is meant by 'bespoke work', as outlined in **Table 22**, the company offers detailed explanations of how the featured programmes can provide professional support to the participants.

**Table 22: Categorisation of the Bespoke Services Provided by C1**

| Type of Services                | Demonstration  | Service breakdown   |
|---------------------------------|--|---|
| Artistic Creation (Programme A) | 'Create their own work, alongside professional artists of international calibre' | 'A bespoke package of developmental support... creative production support, help with funding, creative |



|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
|   |  | <i>mentoring, marketing and future planning'</i>   |
|   |  | <i>'Building up a portfolio of work'</i>   |
| Career-Related Skills<br>(Programme B)    | <i>'Learn the business skills needed to work in the arts and cultural sector'</i>                    | <i>'Producing a career-orientated biography and CV'</i>  |
|   |  | <i>'Gaining knowledge about job application processes'</i>   |
| Networking Opportunities<br>(Programme B) | <i>'Network and meet key personnel in other major creative organisations in Liverpool, and more'</i> | <i>'Increased awareness of the arts industry through networking with [renowned organisations]'</i> |
|   |  | <i>'Attending seminars that include [famous art institutions]'</i>                                 |

\*The organisations mentioned here are the collectives established to promote collaboration between arts organisations in Liverpool.

It is worth noting that the three 'demonstrations' (i.e. the second column) serve as the cues for specifying what it is meant by 'bespoke work'. This evidently indicates that the 'bespoke work' is divided into three different types of services. Also, the meaning of each of these three cues is further substantiated by the 'service breakdowns' (i.e. the third column). For instance, 'producing a CV' is a subsidiary manifestation of 'business skills'. Such a chain of evidence is regarded as a progressive approach to rationalise the professionalism embedded in C1's provision of services.

C7 is the second example where quality of work is reflected from the company's facilities. Firstly, the company articulates its belief in 'world class theatre' (C7) and the declaration of such a belief serves to tease out the professionalism in its on-site theatrical productions. Subsequently, such a belief is defined by addressing its facilities that were intended to accommodate 'story-telling' (C7), which remains the core of the work it delivers, and ensure that each phase of the theatrical production is well facilitated.

**Table 23: Multiple Facilities in C7's Theatre**

| <b>Facility</b>     | <b>Function</b>         | <b>Evidence</b>   |
|---------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Workshop            | Stage Installation      | <i>'where sets are constructed'</i>                               |
| Wardrobe Department | Costume Modification    | <i>'where costumes are cut, fitted and sewn'</i>                  |
| Prop Store          | Storage of Props        | <i>'where furniture and smaller items are stored'</i>             |
| The Lab             | Rehearsal of the Cast   | <i>'where actors work under direction for about four weeks'</i>   |
| Main Auditorium     | Delivery of Performance | <i>'when the production is ready for its opening performance'</i> |

Finally, **C8** best exemplifies that quality of work rests upon the renown of key personnel. In this particular case, key personnel refers to musicians that played a leading role in the history of the company's acclaimed Orchestra. It has been identified that **C8** underscores the renown of the leading musicians by providing the names of those musicians as follows:

*'...a distinguished line of musicians who have led the Orchestra during its illustrious history including [a list of prestigious musicians]' (C8)*

Such a way to justify the quality of work has certain benefits: on the one hand, it resonates with the music lovers, particularly those who have already been drawn by some of the musicians mentioned, as they are fully aware of the standard those prestigious names represent. On the other hand, it might as well communicate such standard to non-music fans because some of the musicians mentioned were granted knighthood (i.e. the title 'Sir' comes before their surnames) which, to some degree, signals that the musicians' quality was recognised by the country (i.e. only people with significant contributions to national life can be knighted).

### **5.3.5 Quality of Networks/Association**

The final sub-theme signifies a firm's proclaimed affiliation. To be specific, sample firms tend to unveil its networks or association where they benefit from the membership of a larger group that is regarded as the leading force in developing the whole industry. In this case, the larger group often refers to either: 1) an alliance initiated and comprised by likeminded organisations in the same industry to achieve holistic, shared goals; or 2) an institution or programme established by some regulatory bodies of the government for allocating the resources (e.g. funding) and serving the society. The following examples cited from **C5's** manifesto best substantiate the abovementioned two types of affiliation:

*‘C5 is a member of [a famous art organisation]’ (C5); and*

*‘We are proud to be part of [governmental institution]’s National Portfolio and [local government] Programme’ (C5)*

It is worth highlighting that the former hints that C5’s ability is recognised by its peers in the same industry whereas the latter hints that C5’s ability is acknowledged by the governmental authority. In summary, by collectively illustrating such types of association, C5’s image of professionalism is reinforced.

## **5.4 Creativity**

Since the SMEs examined in this study all are established in the creative industries, they strive to illustrate that they are creativity-led. Such an OIM theme pervades the bulk of the analysed manifestos. There has been an exhaustive list of keywords used to demonstrate creativity including ‘innovative’, ‘unique’, ‘unusual’ and ‘edgy’. More importantly, the way they project such an impression is beyond simply putting together those variations of the term, ‘creativity’. Therefore, as identified in the analysis of firm manifestos, the way sample firms present creativity is multifaceted and it is reflected in the following areas: ‘uniqueness of organisational offerings’, ‘creativity endorsed by external commentaries’, and ‘alignment’. These three sub-themes will be specified respectively below.

### **5.4.1 Uniqueness of Organisational Offerings**

In this category, companies tend to justify their thirst for creativity by showcasing certain activities which have rarely been done by others in order for audiences to experience the unconventional. For instance, C1 claims, in very simplistic terms, that it aims to produce *‘innovative, dynamic outdoor performance’ (C1)*. To substantiate

how innovative its performance is, the company depicts its provision of services as encouraging ‘*established artists to work outside their comfort zone in unusual places and spaces*’ (C1). Subsequently, in order to strengthen the perception of being creative, the company further elaborates on such unusualness by listing a few locations where its previous art projects took place (i.e. uniqueness of organisational offerings is reflected in the location of artworks):

*‘Previous years’ locations include a garden, a car, a museum, a street alley, an office, a hotel, a private residency and many more’ (C1).*

As clearly seen in the quote above, except for ‘museum’, the other locations can reflect, to a certain degree, how creative the company was in terms of choosing places to install artworks. More importantly, the company’s creative nature is ultimately underpinned by a brief description of its uncommonly delivered projects written at the end of its manifesto. One project that best teases out the creative nature is illustrated as ‘*a masked invasion of [a famous theatre]’s hidden spaces*’ (C1). Here, ‘masked invasion’ and ‘hidden spaces’ jointly emphasise the unconventional experience the company brought to the participants.

Another example is C2. The company, taking a retrospective view of its humble beginnings, illustrated how it distinctively stood out in the crowd when setting up its touring business and how the distinctiveness became a tradition that still has an ongoing impact on its present operation:

*‘The combination of putting together exciting community events with original touring theatre shows became a hallmark for [C2] over the next 20 years, with the additional twist that part of the touring programme was horse-drawn’ (C2).*

*‘Every summer the cast walked over 400 miles alongside the company’s three horse-drawn wagons, travelling throughout the UK and Europe taking its uniquely visual shows to rural audiences’ (C2).*

Needless to say, the *‘horse-drawn’* touring programme in conjunction with *‘uniquely visual shows’* is intended to showcase the distinctive nature of the business and also how such a creativity-laden programme was widely (i.e. *‘throughout the UK and Europe’* (C2)) appreciated among the grass-roots (i.e. *‘rural audiences’* (C2)). Moreover, as a company specialising in shows centred on hand-made puppets and masks, C2 also publicizes how it attempts to inherit the hallmark of being creative in the way it delivered its early theatre shows, when addressing the company’s future plans: *‘we will also continue to explore new technologies where we feel they can add something new to our work’* (C2). Consequently, C2 is presented as being keenly creative throughout its history (i.e. from 1978 onwards) and creativity will remain preserved in the firm’s organisational offerings in the future.

In a similar vein, C3 integrates its pursuit for creativity with the company’s social concern by firmly targeting the marginalised group as its key audience. In other words, the uniqueness of organisational offerings in this case, is mirrored in the firm’s selection of key audience, for which the organisational offerings are custom-made. It is also noteworthy that in its manifesto the company has an independent section centred on innovation. In this section, C3, as a *‘theatre for social change’* (C3) organisation, firstly recognises the statistically supported fact that *‘70% of the public either rarely or never engage with the arts’* (C3), subsequently publicizes its pioneering objective – *‘our work directly targets those that do not ordinarily engage with the arts, especially those least likely and able to do so’* (C3) to overthrow the widely accepted, yet unjust perception *‘the arts are the preserve of an elite’* (C3), and finally articulates how the objective is fulfilled in practice as *‘we work in non-traditional spaces rooted in local communities, with agencies that are able to reach non-traditional participants’* (C3).

As the data suggests, more have followed the same logic. **C5** proclaims that it capitalises on *‘the power of creative technology to inspire and enrich lives’* (**C5**). To illustrate the point, such a power is claimed to be materialised by *‘offering a unique programme of exhibitions, film and participant-led art projects’* (**C5**). The same pattern of the narrative is also employed by **C6** as it presents its belief as *‘everyone can craft and be creative’* (**C6**) and its corresponding aim as *‘to provide a space where creativity can flourish and be shared’* (**C6**). In order to fulfil this organisational aim, the company *‘provides a creative hub for people to meet, talk, work, perform, question, create, craft, display and enjoy themselves’* (**C6**). Nevertheless, these two companies, as clearly displayed above, are in no position as substantive as **C1** in the way the image of being creative is proposed, justified, and further exemplified, since their manifestos lack demonstrations of specific creativity-oriented activities (i.e. no description of creative artworks that have been done in the past) to spark the resonance of their audiences.

Finally, the uniqueness also emerges from a firm’s facility, with which the organisational offerings are delivered. For instance, **C7** addresses the creativity embedded in the interior design of the company’s facility. The company initially puts forth the organisational goal as being *‘different from the usual’* (**C7**), then progressively rationalises how such a goal is carried out through the internal features of its theatre as *‘not only does the set change production to production but the seating develops and changes’* (**C7**), and finally exemplifies the unusual arrangement of its seating as *‘seen in 3 main configurations of in-the-round, end-on and thrust stage’* (**C7**) which is regarded as *‘every time you come and see a show you will enjoy a totally different experience’* (**C7**). More importantly, this case also symbolises the theme

‘benchmark’ as the ‘organisational goal’ (i.e. ‘*different from the usual*’ (C7)) bears a certain degree of resemblance to ‘organisational benchmark’.

#### **5.4.2 Creativity Endorsed by External Commentaries**

The data indicates an alternative approach for SMEs to project the image of creativity to their audiences. This approach features commentaries made by external media outlets that serve to justify the creative nature of the focal companies. For instance, C5 embeds in its manifesto a positive commentary provided by an independent art magazine as follows: ‘*Liverpool's forward-thinking all-inclusive creative technology institution*’ (C5). It is evident that the vocabularies (i.e. forward-thinking and creative) used in the quote are a precise reflection of creativity.

Another salient example is C1 as the company ends its manifesto with a quote that shows how the company is highly valued by a magazine themed around theatrical plays: ‘*A national pioneer keenly aware of the value of the vast resources on its doorstep*’ (C1). In this quote, the phrase ‘*national pioneer*’ hints that C1 is, apart from what has been heavily discussed above, the first or among the earliest to benefit from its roots in local communities (i.e. ‘*vast resources on its doorstep*’) and therefore this pioneering awareness is also creative in some sense.

#### **5.4.3 Alignment**

Finally, in a few occasions, some focal SMEs tend to imply their creativity by proclaiming membership in a well-established, creativity-led cohort or partnership with a number of creativity-oriented initiatives. For instance, C1 proclaims that it is the ‘*founding member of [a creative collective of organisations]*’ (C1). Being one of a few organisations that launched the collective (i.e. founding member) that highly values creativity (i.e. ‘creative’ in the name) warrants the company as being creative.

In a similar vein, **C7** showcases its partnership with University of Bolton that co-created a distinctive BA theatre degree for ‘*developing creative professional practitioners*’ (**C7**). Lastly, **C8** presents itself as an integral part of a group that established ‘*a new National College for the Creative and Cultural Industries*’ (**C8**). Also, the image of creativity is reinforced by stressing that this college is commissioned by a government body partially dedicated to the development of innovation in businesses, and led by a campaigning organisation that helps the UK’s creative businesses to prosper. It is intriguing that this is the only theme identified in **C8**’s manifesto that pertains to creativity. This is presumably due to the company’s main activities of promoting classical music (i.e. symphony orchestra), an art form that is rarely creativity-oriented.

## **5.5 Social Responsibility**

The data indicates that all of the SMEs in question articulate in their manifestos a pro-social status, making social responsibility an extensively addressed organisational impression. In this case, the image of social responsibility is defined as SMEs’ proclaimed duty or obligation to act for the benefit of society at large or their proclaimed commitment to the well-being of some aspects of the society in which they are established (e.g. local communities, marginalised social groups, and young generation). This impression, as revealed by the data, is multifaceted, incorporating organisational value, organisational mission, positive outcome of pro-social activities, audience targeting, and organisational identity. These five sub-themes will be specified below.

### **5.5.1 Organisational Value**

The data suggests that the impression of ‘social responsibility’ emerges from a set of organisational values preserved by sample firms to guide their conducts. A salient



example is **C3**. In the firm's manifesto, an independent section titled 'Our Creed' articulates **C3**'s belief in social change: *'we believe that theatre has the power to transform lives and contribute to social change'* (**C3**). This statement clearly points out the core relationship between what the firm offers to its audience (i.e. theatre) and the well-being of the collective society (i.e. transform lives and contribute to social change). To rationalise such an organisational value, the firm manages to provide reasons why social change is unavoidable and hence must be embraced as *'we believe that our world is undergoing huge changes, and that we face unprecedented environmental, economic and socio-political challenges'* (**C3**). Further, the company continues to specify why its organisational offerings (i.e. theatre) can contribute to social change:

*'...they can help us to question our ways of life and the systems that govern us; help us to feel better about ourselves and our communities; and help us to recognise ourselves as agents of change'* (**C3**).

Another salient example is **C7**. The image of being socially responsible is mainly communicated in a way that it is perceived as a long-lasting value throughout the company's history. In the very beginning, the company slightly teases out a sense of localism: *'[we] believe in reaching out to all of the communities that surround us'* (**C7**). Then, embarking on a review of its origin, the company unveils how this localism has been constantly illustrated through the delivery of its theatrical performance since the early stage of its development:

*'The first story on our stage was...; a new play written by a local playwright – this was an exciting start to the proud tradition we have held strong for 50 years of supporting new and local writing'* (**C7**).

To consolidate the impression of social responsibility being held as an organisational value that is still influential over its present works, the company specifies its

endeavours of improving the mentality of the young or the disabled within the local communities by transforming them into confident story-tellers:

*‘From a popular [C7’s programme] to our work with young people with learning disabilities and groups within the communities of our partner [C7’s partner]; we believe everyone has their own story and theatre can be an amazing tool in empowering and building the confidence in people to tell theirs’ (C7).*

Moreover, a few others have shown a similar tendency to recognise social responsibility as a core value deriving from its start-up stages. Specifically, C5 proclaims that one incisive programme formulated by its predecessor (i.e. earlier form of C5) triggered the company’s focus on youth, education, and local communities: *‘This programme of work...remains at the very heart of all C5’s work with young people, school, communities, and family today’ (C5).* Similarly, C6 depicts its predecessor (i.e. a school also functioned as a hospital) as an institution dedicated to *‘the training of poor boys in the principles of [a church]’ (C6)* in order to imply the company’s belief in youth development.

### **5.5.2 Organisational Mission**

The data also suggests that social responsibility can be referred to as an organisational mission that is executed by the firms’ organisational offerings, most notably, pro-social programmes. It is evident that on the one hand, the organisational value statement can be seen as a demonstration of a firm’s world view that fundamentally tackles the question of ‘what’ (e.g. what do we believe in?). The organisational mission statement, on the other hand, can be understood as the intended means to materialise the upheld organisational values. C3 best exemplifies how the conception of ‘theatre for social change’ (i.e. C3’s organisational value) is addressed and prioritised in its mission statement. It is articulated that the firm’s ultimate goal is

*‘affecting policy and provision’ (C3), and such an ultimate goal can be achieved by the firm’s expertise as described below:*

*‘We will use theatre to excite, entertain and stimulate debate; making new work for new audiences in new spaces; that tackles pressing social and political concerns and gives public voice to marginalised experiences’ (C3).*

In a similar vein, **C1**, **C4**, and **C8** have all demonstrated such a socially charged mission. Evidence is provided below:

*‘C1 aims to combat social exclusion and raise the standard and expectation of community arts’ (C1);*

*‘C4 is dedicated to the city and its people. We want to learn and work together with the city to support and develop new ideas of social change and action through art’ (C4); and*

*‘C8’s mission is to enhance and transform lives through music. We are deeply committed to playing our part in the educational, health and economic regeneration of Liverpool through long term, strategic and targeted music programmes that genuinely achieve positive results within and beyond music for our participants and audiences’ (C8).*

### **5.5.3 Positive Outcome of Pro-Social Activities**

In support of the pro-social organisational values and missions, some of sample firms have chosen to substantiate ‘social responsibility’ by showcasing the positive outcome of their pro-social activities (e.g. participation programmes) from an audience perspective. In doing so, compliments made by the beneficiaries of the pro-social activities are directly quoted. For instance, **C7** and **C1** have capitalised on the reflection over the efficacy of their youth programmes from former participants who affirm that they have benefited immensely from their participation. The quotes are displayed below:

*‘C7 has helped me increase my confidence and given me opportunities to get involved, learn, experience and meet many different people’ – [Participant’s name], young participant of the [C7’s project] (C7); and*

*'The [C1's youth-nurturing programme] 2014 experience has filled our souls with so much passion and enthusiasm to fulfil our career in the arts #dreams #yolo' (C1)*

Such direct quotes, as an external endorsement, are believed to add to the credibility of the projected impression, namely, social responsibility.

#### **5.5.4 Audience Targeting**

The data reveals that the impression of being socially responsible can alternatively be reflected in a firm's well-positioned focus on a particular audience group. Such a particular audience group must conform to the commonly-held notion of the disadvantaged in the collective society. For instance, **C3**, in addition to concentrating on the more collective side of the society (see *Section 5.5.1* for details, also reveals its favoured audience as a way to give public voice to marginalised experience. This marginalised experience which the company seeks to explore stems from *'those that do not ordinarily engage with the arts, especially those least likely and able to do so'* (**C3**). Such particular audience targeting is motivated by the compelling fact that *'70% of the public either rarely or never engage with the arts'* (**C3**) and the underlying fact that *'there are many social, psychological, political, logistical and economic barriers to preventing more people from engaging'* (**C3**). It is worth noting that this reflects the company's intention to customise its theatre-based participatory programmes to cater to the needs of people with limited access to arts in their normal life and hence again reconcile its practical operations with its aforementioned pro-social organisational value and mission. More importantly, the whole disclosure of social responsibility (i.e. the combination of organisational value, organisational mission, and audience targeting) is firmly supported by a robust rationale (the statistics are cited from an empirical report

produced by the Arts Council England in 2007), making it a multi-layered projection of the image of being socially responsible.

Similarly, others have also pinpointed their programmes that are initiated, or offer friendly service, for certain types of disadvantaged people. For instance, **C1** showcases its community engagement programmes that provide bespoke services to '*vulnerable individuals and isolated communities*' (**C1**); **C4**, illustrates its long-lasting collaboration with institutions for child education (i.e. '*the education programme includes...long-term partnerships with Liverpool schools*' (**C4**)); and **C8** integrates both its community and education programmes with its long-term development plan (i.e. '*...targeted community programmes which reach vulnerable adults throughout the city...uses child-led creative music making that develops...emotional wellbeing, confidence, communication and language skills increasing children's readiness for school*' (**C8**)).

#### **5.5.5 Organisational Identity**

Finally, it has been identified from the data that 'social responsibility' also stems from the emphasis on organisational identity. In this case, some of the firms are prone to disclosing their pro-social status as the most straightforward way to shape the impression of being socially responsible. It is imperative to note that this pro-social status is twofold: 1) a firm directly declares its certified charitable cause; and 2) a firm identifies itself as being socially driven in its self-portrayal. The former is best exemplified by **C2** as the firm unveils straightforwardly its charitable cause by stating that it is '*part of [the parent company's name], a registered charity*' (**C2**). This directly aligns **C2** with the nature of its parent company (i.e. a non-profit organisation) and consequently warrants **C2** a certified identity (i.e. registered charity as certified

by governmental authorities) of being socially responsible. The latter is emphasized in C3's manifesto. At the very beginning of its manifesto where its major operations are mapped out, the company discloses the pro-social identity – '*specialising in theatre for social change through collaborative practice*' (C3) – that remains the core principle to guide what the company does. To embark on the pursuit for social change and enhance the image of being socially responsible, the company specifies how it attempts to tackle social issues in general:

*'we work with young people, adults and older people offering sustained and long terms participatory programmes, using theatre to build confidence, develop skills and explore the issues and ideas which matter to them'* (C3).

## **5.6 Attractiveness**

The data suggests that the examined SMEs are inclined to exhibit a number of organisational features that they reckon appeal to their audiences. These organisational features including 'multidimensional attractiveness of organisational facilities', and 'provision of immersive experience' are determined to help project the image of being attractive.

### **5.6.1 Multidimensional Traits of Organisational Facilities**

C6 is deemed most exemplary in terms of showcasing multidimensional traits reflected in the firm's facilities. In this case, attractiveness emerging out of the firm's facilities is threefold: 1) historical significance; 2) aesthetics; and 3) convenience.

Firstly, the company reveals the most appealing trait that defines the building where it is based: '*the most historic building in Liverpool's city centre*' (C6). Such a feature also hints that apart from the exhibitions that take place on a regular basis, the building itself is able to attract visitors especially tourists who come to visit the city. Then, to elaborate on the superlative, '*the most historic*', the company showcases what the

building was awarded centuries ago: *‘Dating from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the building’s architectural importance is illuminated by its UNESCO world heritage and Grade One listed status’* (C6). This evidently verifies the historical and architectural significance of the building.

Also, the same narrative is repeated in a way that the company further substantialises such an appealing architectural feature by illustrating the aesthetical significance of the building:

*‘Its elegant Queen Anne style architecture, cobbled front courtyard and beautiful ‘secret garden’ make it amongst the top visitor attractions in the region. This Grade 1 Listed building is an architectural gem and, almost 300 years old, is the oldest building in the city centre’* (C6).

It is evident that terms such as *‘elegant’* and *‘beautiful’* are a symbolic manifestation of the firm’s aesthetical significance. More intriguingly, the aesthetical significance illustrated in this quote is not only directed at ordinary visitors, it is also portrayed in a way to entice architecture fans who are most likely drawn to the architectural design: *‘The building’s design has caused much speculation, and research is currently being undertaken to discover the identity of the mystery architect’* (C6).

Further, the third dimension, ‘convenience’ is mostly illustrated in two ways. Firstly, the accommodativeness of the facilities which visitors may enjoy during their tour is articulated. For instance, C6 proclaims that its built-in facilities are designed to cater to the needs of different visitors. Evidence is provided as follows: *‘...and a relaxing garden situated at the rear provides the ideal location to enjoy a beer, wine or soft drink in the summer’* (C6).

Accessibility is another theme employed by sample firms to address convenience. A notable example is C6: *‘[C6] also has Explore, a set of free family craft activities taking place over the weekend’* (C6). Also, in a similar vein, C3 claims in the

manifesto that its services are all free (i.e. *‘we provide our work free of charge’*). For **C3**, this does indeed encourage participation and hence appeals to the bulk of its audience since the company’s target audience (i.e. *‘those that do not ordinarily engage with the arts, especially those least likely and able to do so’*) are unlikely to pay for art activities.

### **5.6.2 Provision of Immersive Experience**

The data also indicates that in some occasions sample firms proclaim to offer immersive experience for their target audience. Such immersive experience is often stimulated by the way they deliver their organisational offerings, most notably, theatrical plays. For instance, **C2** initially self-assesses the artistic quality of its theatrical plays and proclaims that it is devoted to making theatre *‘playful, moving, and inspiring’* (**C2**). This artistic quality is facilitated, as the company unveils, by the collective of its story installations:

*‘We create exciting story installations at our theatre, [the theatre’s name] – sensory journeys for young families to experience together – [programme A], [programme B], and [programme C] have used puppetry, lights, projections, live music, a rocket, a restaurant, inflatable plants, soup, sand and lots and lots of sensory play to create immersive theatre experiences’* (**C2**).

In this case, all the listed installations that are believed to deliver *‘sensory’* plays and hence create *‘immersive’* experiences, echo with, to a certain degree, the abovementioned expertise of producing *‘playful, moving, and inspiring’* (**C2**) theatrical performances.

**C1** qualifies as another example to typify the provision of immersive experience. Unlike **C2**, the company adopts an alternative approach to illustrate that its organisational offerings are well adored. Specifically, compliments from participants have been quoted to rationalise, as an external voice, the immersive experience



activated by **C1**'s programme. Firstly, the company depicts its artistic performances as '*lively, quirky and interactive*' (**C1**). These three vocabularies symbolise what it is meant by being 'immersive'. To justify the self-depiction, participant feedback is showcased as follows: '*The programme is exciting, fun-filled, creatively stimulating and immersive*' (**C1**). This type of feedback reflects how the company's offering appeals to not only audiences, but also participants and hence comply with its self-depiction.

It is noteworthy that one case hardly presents any information pertaining to attractiveness. **C4** does not appear to project the image of being attractive as not a single extract can be identified to represent the theme. The plausible reason is that the company has multiple project-based segments on its website and each of them displays information that is exclusive to the promoted project (i.e. web blogs that broadcast constitutive elements of each project and the signature artworks included). In doing so, the functionality of the manifesto is diluted as it even contains little summative information of specific projects or programmes initiated by the company. As a consequence, although it cannot be synthesized from the firm's manifesto, the organisational impression of being attractive might be reflected in **C4**'s social media postings.

## 5.7 Summary

Overall, in order to answer **RQ1** (i.e. how SMEs desire to be perceived online?), as summarised in **Table 24**, four organisational impressions, including 'professionalism', 'creativity', 'social responsibility', and 'attractiveness', have been identified from the firm manifestos collected from sample firms' official websites. Firstly, 'professionalism' symbolises SMEs' intent to showcase and evidence their expertise pertaining to their organisational offerings in the industry. In this study, such expertise

is reflected from SMEs' achievements, diversity, and capacity with regard to their organisational offerings, and also their quality of work and professional networks. Secondly, 'creativity', which reflects SMEs' pursuit in originality, is respectively presented as SMEs' organisational benchmark and the key attribution of SMEs' organisational offerings. Also, this particular impression is addressed by showcasing external endorsement and claiming membership of a larger creativity-centric cohort. Thirdly, 'social responsibility', which mirrors SMEs' commitment to the well-being of the surrounding society, is mainly esteemed as SMEs' organisational value and organisational mission. Also, this impression is underpinned by emphasising SMEs' positive outcome of pro-social activities, targeting marginalised audience groups, and claiming a charitable identity. Finally, 'attractiveness' is reflected in a number of organisational features which SMEs believe appeal to their target audiences. Such organisational features are akin to SMEs' facilities that uphold the value of historical significance, aesthetics, and convenience, and also the provision of immersive experience. The next chapter presents the findings based on the data collected from social media postings.

**Table 24: Summary of Organisational Impressions Projected by SMEs Online**

| SMEs      | Organisational Impressions   |  |  |  |
|-----------|--|--|--|--|
|           | Professionalism  | Creativity   | Social Responsibility  | Attractiveness   |
| <b>C1</b> | <p><b>Achievements</b> (e.g. '[C1] is an award-winning arts organisation...')</p> <p><b>Quality of work</b> (e.g. 'we are also able to create bespoke work...')</p> <p><b>Quality of networks/association</b> (e.g. 'we work with some of the UK's leading artists and performers')</p>  | <p><b>Uniqueness of organisational offerings</b> (e.g. '[C1] provides professional development...that encourage established artists to work outside their comfort zone in unusual places and spaces')</p> <p><b>External endorsement</b> (e.g. 'the programme is exciting, fun-filled, creatively stimulating and immersive...' – commentary given by a customer)</p> <p><b>Alignment</b> (e.g. '[C1] is the founding member of [a collective organisation known for creativity]')</p> | <p><b>Organisational mission</b> (e.g. '[C1] aims to combat social exclusion')</p> <p><b>Positive outcome of pro-social activities</b> (e.g. 'a unique supportive bridge into the industry' – commentary provided by a beneficiary);</p> <p><b>Audience targeting</b> (e.g. '[C1]'s community engagement programmes provide opportunities for vulnerable individuals and isolated communities')</p>  | <p><b>Appealing traits of facilities</b> (e.g. '[C1] has accessible city centre rehearsal rooms available for daytime and evening use')</p> <p><b>Provision of immersive experience</b> (e.g. '[C1]'s project]: an immersive theatrical game...')</p>            |
| <b>C2</b> | <p><b>Diversity</b> (e.g. '[C2] hosts a rich and varied programme of work...runs music nights, films, workshops and training courses in addition to its family orientated programme and an annual Puppet Festival')</p> <p><b>Quality of networks/association</b> (e.g. 'many of the early company members came from students...at [a prestigious art college], and by other friends from [a renowned theatre]')</p> | <p><b>Uniqueness of organisational offerings</b> (e.g. '[C2] was] travelling throughout the UK and Europe taking its uniquely visual shows to rural audiences')</p>  | <p><b>Organisational value</b> (e.g. 'art is important and can change lives')</p> <p><b>Positive outcomes of pro-social activities</b> (e.g. '[C2]'s venue] also allows us to have a lasting impact on our neighbourhood, and to share our skills and resources')</p> <p><b>Audience targeting</b> (e.g. '[C2]'s children-led project] is a project designed to engage with parents and very young children')</p> <p><b>Organisational identity</b> (e.g. 'we are a NPO (National Portfolio Organisation) with Arts Council of England support')</p>   | <p><b>Provision of immersive experience</b> (e.g. '[C2]'s programmes] have used puppetry, lights, projections, live music, a rocket, a restaurant, inflatable plants, soup, sand and lots and lots of sensory play to create immersive theatre experiences')</p> |
| <b>C3</b> | <p><b>Diversity</b> (e.g. 'we are committed to offering training and placement opportunities to students and emerging professionals; accreditation and progression pathways to participants; and CDP to staff')</p> <p><b>Capacity</b> (e.g. 'we use training and capacity building initiatives to develop the capacity of the arts and non-arts sector to deliver high-quality participatory arts activities')</p>  | <p><b>Uniqueness of organisational offerings</b> (e.g. 'to do this we work in non-traditional spaces rooted in local communities, with agencies that are able to reach non-traditional participants')</p>  | <p><b>Organisational value</b> (e.g. 'We value dialogue between company and community; artists and participants; and between all those working in different ways to effect social change')</p> <p><b>Organisational mission</b> (e.g. '...a wider role to play in affecting policy and provision')</p> <p><b>Positive outcomes of pro-social activities</b> (e.g. 'we have an Engagement Strategy that sets out a clear action plan for continuing to extend our reach')</p> <p><b>Audience targeting</b> (e.g. 'our work directly targets those that do not ordinarily engage with the arts, especially those least likely and able to do so')</p> <p><b>Organisational identity</b> (e.g. 'theatre for social change')</p> | <p><b>Appealing traits of facilities</b> (e.g. 'we provide our work free of charge')</p>   |

|           |  |   |  |  |
|-----------|--|---|--|--|
|           | <b>Quality of work</b> (e.g. '[C3] is a professional arts organisation specialising in theatre...')  |   |  |  |
| <b>C4</b> | <p><b>Diversity</b> (e.g. '[C4's programme] is organised as a story narrated in several episodes: fictional worlds sited in galleries, public spaces, unused buildings and online')</p> <p><b>Capacity</b> (e.g. '[C4] has commissioned 305 new artworks and presented work by over 450 artists from around the world')</p> <p><b>Quality of networks/association</b> (e.g. 'the education programme includes... long-term partnerships with Liverpool schools')</p>   | <b>Uniqueness of organisational offerings</b> (e.g. '[C4's exhibition] takes place across the city in public places, unused buildings and galleries')   | <p><b>Organisational mission</b> (e.g. 'we want to learn and work together with the city to support and develop new ideas of social change and action through art')</p> <p><b>Audience targeting</b> (e.g. 'artists have worked together with children to create major new commissions as part of [C4's children-led education programme]')</p>  | <b>None detected</b> (presumably due to website's design that displays little information of C4's facilities)  |
| <b>C5</b> | <p><b>Diversity</b> (e.g. 'we work with partners across the creative industries, health, higher education and arts sectors to develop multi-disciplinary projects exploring the relationship between technology and culture')</p> <p><b>Capacity</b> (e.g. 'showcasing ground-breaking new media art from across the world, our artistic programme has presented over 350 new media and digital artworks')</p> <p><b>Quality of work</b> (e.g. 'this is a gallery that allows digital artists to think like film-makers and have their ambitions realised in a professional environment')</p> <p><b>Quality of networks/association</b> (e.g. '[C5] is a member of [an art-based collective] and chairs [another art-based collective]')</p> | <p><b>Uniqueness of organisational offerings</b> (e.g. 'offering a unique programme of exhibitions, film and participant-led art projects, we use the power of creative technology to inspire and enrich lives')</p> <p><b>External endorsement</b> (e.g. 'Liverpool's forward-thinking all-inclusive creative technology institution' – an art magazine)</p> | <p><b>Organisational value</b> (e.g. '[C5's programme] remains at the very heart of all C5's work with young people, school, communities and family today')</p> <p><b>Positive outcome of pro-social activities</b> (e.g. 'our dynamic community, learning, health, and young people's programmes offer exciting opportunities for more than 3000 individuals...')</p> <p><b>Organisational identity</b> (e.g. '[C5] is a registered charity')</p> | <b>Appealing traits of facilities</b> (e.g. 'our award-winning [C5] building is home to three galleries...a beautiful café...a cosy bar, and four state of the art film screens (including intimate sofa-seated The Box)') |
| <b>C6</b> | <p><b>Achievements</b> (e.g. '[C6]'s own promotions have achieved a national profile, with an award-winning art gallery...')</p> <p><b>Diversity</b> (e.g. 'music, dance, literature, live art and other performance activity are also part of the arts offer')</p>  | <b>Uniqueness of organisational offering</b> (e.g. '[C6] provides a creative hub for people to meet, talk, work, perform, question, create, craft, display and enjoy themselves')   | <b>Organisational value</b> (e.g. '...dedicated to the promotion of Christian charity and the training of poor boys')  | <b>Appealing traits of facilities</b> (e.g. '[C6] building's architectural importance is illuminated by its UNESCO world heritage')  |

|    |  |  |  |  |
|----|--|--|--|--|
|    | <p><b>Capacity</b> (e.g. ‘whilst literally hundreds of artists and creative organisations have been supported in different ways at [C6] ...many more individuals have acknowledged a connection to the building’)</p> <p><b>Quality of work</b> (e.g. ‘Liverpool’s centre for the contemporary arts, [C6] showcases talent across visual art, music, dance, live art and literature’)</p> <p><b>Quality of networks/association</b> (e.g. ‘[a famous artist] had her first paid performance at [C6] in 1967...’)</p> |  |  |  |
| C7 | <p><b>Quality of work</b> (e.g. ‘[C7] can provide bespoke Education sessions for both Primary and Secondary schools’)</p> <p><b>Diversity</b> (e.g. ‘[C7]’s programme] brings together a diverse mix of artists and theatre companies to put on a wide-ranging selection of exciting and engaging performances, experiences and events inside, outside and online at [C7]’)</p>  | <p><b>Uniqueness of organisational offerings</b> (e.g. ‘through our support and development of emerging theatre-makers we are bringing some exciting new work to our stages as well as the streets of [C7]’s city’)</p> <p><b>External endorsement</b> (e.g. ‘It is always exciting to be part of a bulk of young new creatives. It makes you feel like you are not alone!’ – commentary made by a participant)</p> <p><b>Alignment</b> (e.g. ‘this ground-breaking partnership between university and theatre has created many collaborations and projects...’)</p> | <p><b>Organisational value</b> (e.g. ‘we are theatre...believe in reaching out to all of the communities that surround us...bring wonderful theatrical experiences to the people of [local community] and beyond’)</p> <p><b>Positive outcome of pro-social activities</b> (e.g. ‘[C7] has helped me increase my confidence and given me opportunities to get involved, learn, experience and meet many different people’ – commentary made by a beneficiary of [C7]’s programme)</p> <p><b>Audience targeting</b> (e.g. ‘our work with young people with learning disabilities...’)</p> | <p><b>Provision of immersive experience</b> (e.g. ‘we lovingly bring stories to life on our stages designed to make you laugh, cry and sit on the edge of your seat’)</p> <p><b>Appealing traits of facilities</b> (e.g. ‘we have a large workshop...a small sound engineering studio, a wardrobe department...and a prop store...[C7]’s rehearsal space, The Lab...Main Auditorium...’)</p> |
| C8 | <p><b>Achievements</b> (e.g. ‘...at the centre of which is the award-winning [C8] Orchestra’)</p> <p><b>Diversity</b> (e.g. ‘[C8] has long been a unique ambassador for Liverpool through an extensive touring schedule throughout the UK and internationally, and through broadcasts and recordings’)</p> <p><b>Capacity</b> (e.g. ‘[C8] presents more than 400 concerts and events...annually’;</p>  | <p><b>Uniqueness of organisational offerings</b> (e.g. ‘...child-led creative music making...increasing children’s readiness for school’)</p> <p><b>Alignment</b> (e.g. ‘we are part of [a creativity-led collective] establishing a new [educational institution] for the Creative and Cultural Industries’)</p>  | <p><b>Organisational mission</b> (e.g. ‘[C8]’s mission is to enhance and transform lives through music’)</p> <p><b>Positive outcomes of pro-social activities</b> (e.g. ‘we have a long-term partnership with [a national trust] through [C8]’s educational programme] programme...our musicians provide over 2,000 sessions each year and the programme has benefited over 10,000 service users since it began’)</p> <p><b>Audience targeting</b> (e.g. ‘...offering many opportunities for young people to develop their skills including’)</p>  | <p><b>Appealing traits of facilities</b> (e.g. ‘the beautiful hall with its superb acoustic, the stylish [facility A] and the more intimate setting of the [facility B] have the flexibility to accommodate any kind of event from conferences and meetings to seminars, receptions and private parties’)</p>  |

|  |   |  |  |  |
|--|---|--|--|--|
|  | <p><i>'more than 350,000 children and adults engage with [C8] annually')</i></p> <p><b>Quality of work</b> (e.g. <i>'...an extensive learning programme which is recognised as a national leader in its field in its quality, reach and impact on our communities')</i></p> <p><b>Quality of networks/association</b> (e.g. <i>'collaborations with international artists from rock, pop, folk and dance music include [a list of renowned artists]')</i></p> |  |  |  |
|--|---|--|--|--|

## CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS (ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA POSTINGS)

### 6.1 Introduction

*Chapter 6*, in order to answer **RQ1**, presents the findings based on the data collected from the first source – firm manifestos. This chapter presents the findings based on the data collected from social media postings, which is intended to answer **RQ2**. The analysis yields a taxonomy of OIM strategies which mainly embodies two sets of OIM strategies, namely, qualification-oriented and relationship-oriented strategies. This chapter mainly consists of two parts. *Section 6.2* addresses how the two broad sets of OIM strategies have been synthesised from the examined social media postings. *Section 6.3* and *6.4* presents how these two sets of OIM strategies are defined, interpreted and exemplified, meaning that the results are presented with examples and direct quotations where necessary. Finally, a conclusion is offered to sum up the whole chapter.

### 6.2 Overview

In order for the readers to better understand how the analysis of social media postings was carried out, this section elaborates on how the sub-themes and the overarching themes were synthesised.

During the period of categorisation and pattern recognition (see *Chapter 4* for details), the researcher aimed to identify elements regarding how the four organisational impressions identified in *Chapter 5* were shaped. Driven by the purpose, the researcher created a number of initial codes and then classified them into several categories for each case (i.e. within-case themes). Subsequently, these codes and

categories were compared and reconciled across different cases (i.e. cross-case themes).

Firstly, some of the initial codes were mainly a reflection of the appealing features (i.e. OIM-laden features) of the focal firms' promotions. It was primarily based on the appealing features that the firms tried to convince their target audiences that their promotions are worth paying attention to. Then, it occurred to the researcher that these appealing features were twofold in nature: 1) some of them were highlighted by the firms themselves; and 2) some of them were highlighted by external parties.

The firms self-highlighted their appealing features basically through 1) positive vocabularies that were selected to shape certain impressions; and 2) further elaborations of what is was meant by the vocabularies. The former was text-based whilst the latter mostly embodied imagery and videos and these two approaches were often found to be combined. Given their differences in nature, these two approaches were thematised as 'generalising' and 'substantialising' (see *Section 6.3.1* for details).

The way in which the appealing features were highlighted by external parties was found to form three classes: 1) only the name of the external parties was emphasised in the narrative of the postings; 2) the name of, and the positive commentaries provided by the external parties were both emphasised; and 3) the positive commentaries provided by the external parties were not directed at the focal firms' promotions, but at their external environment. It was also found in the first class that the external parties were renowned among the firms' target audiences and hence this renown was the key feature that might appeal to the target audiences. In the second class, the positive commentaries were directly quoted to rationalise why the features appealed to the target audiences. In the third class, positive commentaries were publicized to



rationalise why certain qualities of the focal firms' external environment were appealing. Therefore, these three classes were respectively labelled as 'credibility of the external entity' (see *Section 6.3.2.1* for details), 'external rationalisation' (see *Section 6.3.2.2* for details), and 'underpinning external environment' (see *Section 6.3.2.3* for details). Subsequently, the two strategies of highlighting the appealing features, given the difference stated above, were thematised as 'self-acknowledgement' (see *Section 6.3.1* for details) and 'external acknowledgement' (see *Section 6.3.2* for details).

Secondly, the rest of the initial codes were centred on the social networks of sample firms. Specifically, sample firms were seen to selectively demonstrate the positive relationships between themselves and the other parties. It was gathered that the demonstration of relationships was twofold: 1) the emphasis was given to the focal firms' endeavours to positivize (i.e. make something positive) the relationships with the related entities (i.e. individuals or organisations in interaction with the focal firms); and 2) the emphasis was given to the extent to which the demonstrated relationships should be viewed positive.

Four types of behaviours were identified when sample firms made endeavours to positivize the relationships between the focal firms and the other parties. Distinctive features could be observed from each of them. Specifically, the first type was basically the firms' attempts to praise something done by the related others (e.g. participants in a programme). This was similar to 'self-acknowledgement' (see *Section 6.3.1* for details) as they both demonstrated compliments. However, in 'self-acknowledgement', compliments were directed to the firms themselves, whereas in this category compliments were directed to others. Thus, this type of behaviours was labelled as 'flattery' (see *Section 6.4.1.1* for details). The second type of behaviours

featured the firms' attempts to comply with the opinions of others. Therefore, it was named as 'opinion conformity' (see *Section 6.4.1.2* for details). Social media postings of the third behavioural type were found to 1) express gratitude to others; 2) greet others; and 3) apologize to others. One commonality among these three behaviours was later recognised that they were all used to present sample firms in a way that others would appreciate. Hence, this type was categorised as 'self-presentation' (see *Section 6.4.1.3* for details). The fourth type was associated with the firms' behaviours to offer assistance to others and thus it was synthesised as 'favour-rendering' (see *Section 6.4.1.4* for details). From a holistic point of view, these four behavioural types all served to ingratiate the firms with others. It was through this means that positive relationships were established, maintained, and enhanced. Therefore, the overarching strategy was named as 'ingratiation' (see *Section 6.4.1* for details).

Alternatively, another distinctive OIM behaviour was identified. This behaviour mirrored the firms' purpose of rationalising the positivity of the relationships between themselves and others (i.e. to articulate the reasons how the firms and the other parties were positively related). The related parties in this case were found to uphold a good reputation in the eyes of the firms' target audiences and that might explain why the firms tried to convince the target audiences that the demonstrated relationships were positive. Therefore, this behaviour was labelled as 'positivity of the relationship' (see *Section 6.4.2* for details).

Finally, since the appealing features discussed above were mainly associated with how qualified the firms were in the activities they had done, they were thematised as 'qualifications' (i.e. self-claimed qualifications and other-claimed qualifications). Thus, the OIM strategies were considered as 'qualification-oriented strategies' (see *Section 6.3* for details). Meanwhile, the demonstration of social networks discussed

above was primarily involved with behaviours to either positivize relationships or rationalise how the relationships were positive. Hence, these behaviours were thematised as ‘relationship-oriented strategies’ (see *Section 6.4* for details). These two sets of OIM strategies were the overarching OIM strategies for social media postings of sample firms. These two sets of strategies will be broken down and elaborated on next.

### **6.3 Qualification-Oriented Strategies**

The data indicates that sample firms are often seen prone to underscoring their qualifications. Here, qualifications symbolise SMEs’ intent to showcase how qualified they are in delivering their organisational offerings. This set of strategies includes two sub-strategies: ‘self-acknowledgement’ (i.e. SMEs self-claim, self-elaborate, and self-rationalise the featured qualifications) and ‘external acknowledgement’ (i.e. the featured qualifications are certified by external entities). The former is self-focused as it only involves OIM-oriented endeavours made by the SMEs alone, whilst the latter is other-focused since it associates with external entities to help foster the desired impressions. These two OIM strategies will be addressed respectively in the following sections.

#### **6.3.1 Self-Acknowledgement**

The data indicates that sample firms are inclined to underpin self-claimed qualifications. The process in which the self-claimed qualifications are presented has been thematised as ‘self-acknowledgement’. Here, ‘self-acknowledgement’ is twofold as the first step is self-depiction of the promoted qualification and the second is sense-making of the self-depicted qualification. These two steps have been thematised respectively as ‘generalising’ and ‘substantialising’. To be specific, ‘generalising’ refers to sample firms’ efforts to embellish their self-claimed

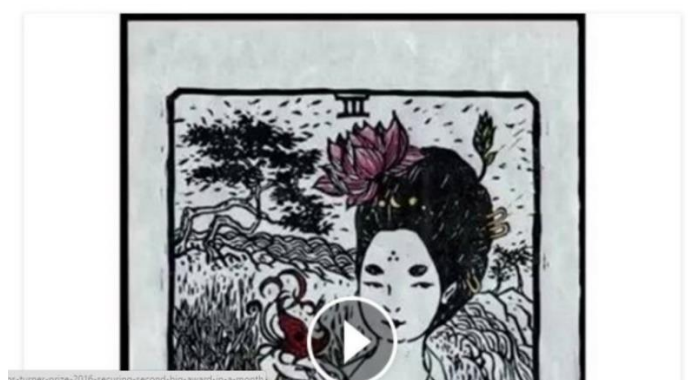
qualifications, using only broad-brushing vocabularies (i.e. vague words that lack details) such as ‘beautiful’, and ‘great fun’. It is worth noting that these self-claimed qualifications are impression-laden (i.e. they are used to shape the organisational impressions identified in *Chapter 5*). Hence, the employed vocabularies also serve to shape relevant organisational impressions. For instance, ‘beautiful’ is contextually associated with ‘professionalism’ (i.e. ‘beautiful limited editions’ mainly refers to the artistic quality in the case addressed below), whilst ‘great fun’ is primarily linked with ‘attractiveness’. ‘Substantialising’, on the other hand, signifies the provision of a more tangible evidence base by sample firms to support the self-depicted qualification. Such evidence base often takes form of photos, videos, or figures and therefore it is usually visualised or quantified in order to elaborate on/clarify the broad-brushing vocabularies. More importantly, ‘substantialising’ is not essentially an empirical justification of the self-claimed qualifications. Instead, in many cases (i.e. which will be addressed below), it is seen more as providing the specifics to help deepen the audience’s understanding of the self-depiction and so it depends on the audience to make their own judgement on whether the self-depicted qualifications are accurately approximated or exaggerated. Since ‘generalising’ and ‘substantialising’ are often employed in combination, the practical application of these two layers of ‘self-acknowledgement’ will be analysed as a collective in the following section.

The first instance is **C4**. In this illustrated case, ‘professionalism’ (see *Chapter 5* for details) is the predominant organisational impression **C4** attempts to project. Since ‘professionalism’ is clearly articulated in the firm’s manifesto (e.g. ‘*C4 has commissioned 305 new artworks...*’ (**C4**)), **C4** has made endeavours to depict its commissioned artworks as of premium artistic quality on Facebook as follows:

*‘Looking to give or own contemporary art? Have a look at our beautiful limited editions, now a festive 10% off. [www.\[C4's Website\]/editions](http://www.[C4's Website]/editions)’*  
(26/11/2016)

As clearly shown above, **C4** chooses the word ‘beautiful’ to describe the promoted artworks and hence this word acts as the broad-brushing self-depiction of the firm’s artistic quality. It is evident that such a word alone only produces a vague representation of the aesthetic quality of its products as no explanation of how the artworks are ‘beautiful’ is provided by the text. Another phrase ‘limited editions’ also hints the scarcity of the promoted artworks, but it neither enables the audience to make sense of how the artworks qualify as ‘beautiful’ and ‘limited’. In order to visualise what it means to be ‘beautiful’, **C4** attaches a click-to-play video (as shown in *Screenshot 1*) following the text. This video offers a visualised presentation of what the artworks look like, based on which social media audiences can make their own judgement of whether the artworks are ‘beautiful’ and whether the ‘limited editions’ are worth the price. Although aesthetics varies across people and is thus subjective, it is imperative to grant access for audiences to make sense of the self-depicted qualification. Therefore, this video is regarded as a gateway to substantialising the self-depicted qualification.

*Screenshot 1*



In a similar vein, the combination of generalising and substantialising is also applied to shape a different organisational impression – ‘attractiveness’ (see *Chapter 5* for details). On Facebook, **C4** teases out the essence of its child-oriented education programme by articulating how attractive it is for the target participants:

*‘Great fun puppet-making at our Chinatown-inspired family workshop!  
Drop into the final session on 16 Oct [URL of the workshop]’ (27/09/2016)*

It is clearly pointed out that the puppet-making is portrayed as ‘great fun’ and this is regarded as the broad-brush representation of the attractiveness-laden feature of the firm’s programme. Nonetheless, this word alone does not provide a direct expository of how the work is perceived as ‘great fun’. Thus, a photo (see *Screenshot 2*) showing children actively participating in playing with the puppets is presented to further make sense of what ‘great fun’ is for the families with children – the target participants of this programme. Consequently, it can be observed in this case that **C4** uses general, vague vocabularies, as an initial step, to tease out the desired impression (i.e. attractiveness in this case). Subsequently, a visualised tool (e.g. photos and videos) is supplemented to make sense of, and hence consolidate the projected impression (i.e. attractiveness in this case).

### Screenshot 2



The next example is associated with the organisational impression – ‘social responsibility’ (see *Chapter 5* for details). **C8**, in its manifesto, heavily addresses its commitment to improving the music education of children. Evidence is provided below:

*‘[The learning programme]...develops musical skills, emotional wellbeing, confidence, communication and language skills increasing children’s readiness for school’ (C8).*

This particular commitment is evidently publicized on **C8**’s Twitter account. For instance, the following tweet demonstrates how the company nurtures children’s musical talent:

*‘Brilliant! @ [C8’s other Twitter account for this particular learning programme] RT @ [C8’s partner’s Twitter account]: Christmas arrived in 1P yesterday! #StarsInTheMaking’ (05/12/2016)*

Similar to the examples addressed above, this tweet also features the combination of generalising and substantialising. In this case, generalising is reflected in the use of the word ‘brilliant’, while substantialising is reflected in the video attached to the tweet. This video shows the scene of several pupils co-playing instruments to pre-celebrate upcoming Christmas. What distinguishes the tweet from previous examples

is that a hashtag (i.e. #StarsInTheMaking) is employed to match the broad-brushing vocabulary (i.e. ‘brilliant’). Therefore, the hashtag is also deemed as a special form of ‘generalising’ as it hints the firm’s commitment of nurturing talents. It is also noteworthy that this hashtag is echoed by many on Twitter. Thus, it is more efficient to spread what the tweet by using this hashtag (i.e. it can reach a wider audience as Twitter users may come across the tweet by searching this hashtag). The usage of popular hashtags is hence regarded as a social-media-exclusive means (i.e. Twitter in this case) to facilitate the outreach of self-claimed qualifications.

Furthermore, in order to fully substantialise self-claimed qualifications without taking up too much space on social media, photos are sometimes collaged (i.e. sticking multiple photos together as one) to generate a collective effect. For instance, **C6**, articulates its focus on ‘creativity’ (one of the organisational impressions identified in *Chapter 5*) in its manifesto:

*‘[C6] provides a creative hub for people to meet, talk, work, perform, question, create, craft, display and enjoy themselves’ (C6).*

The following tweet clearly demonstrates how such a focus is publicized through Twitter:

*‘Lots of movement & creativity for Family Day today join us tomorrow from 1-4 PM for more free activities for all the family’ (25/03/2017)*

Specifically, the tweet uses the phrase ‘lots of’ to indicate the variety of the creativity-led ‘Family Day’ activity. It is worth highlighting that one large photo that is constituted by three small photos (see *Screenshot 3*), with each photo showcasing an aspect of the activity, is used to substantialise the phrase ‘lots of’. It can also be observed that not all three photos are equally proportioned. The one on the left side showing what the activity features (i.e. paper-crafting) is prioritised. This is presumably because it illustrates how creativity emerges from the activity (i.e. through



paper-crafting). The other two mainly display how ‘lots of movement and creativity’ means for the participating families (i.e. children and their parents can be standing or sitting while doing paper-crafting; there is no singular format of the activity). The collage of photos is regarded as a means to substantialise the creativity-laden qualification when no excessive space is needed.

### Screenshot 3



The next example features a quantified way of substantialising the self-claimed qualifications. In this case, **C4** puts forth its dedication for social change by indicating:

*‘We want to learn and work together with the city to support and develop new ideas of social change and action through art’ (C4).*

The Company illustrates what it is meant by facilitating social change as one of its objectives by specifying its contribution to a specific marginalised social group:

*‘We’re delighted to share that [the participating artist]’s artwork raised £1,224 for [the partner involved in the programme] and the vital work they do with refugees and asylum seekers’ (09/12/2016)*

This post employs a general phrase, ‘vital work’, to describe **C4**’s contribution to the social problem. What follows is that it straightforwardly gives a specific number, namely, ‘£1,224’ (a concrete amount of money raised by the firm’s artwork to help improve the lives of those refugees and asylum seekers) to substantialise and make

sense of the contribution. Here, the number (i.e. '£1,224') alone offers an explicit, quantitative account of the outcome of the 'vital work' **C4** has done.

*Screenshot 4*



Moreover, such quantitative sense-making is accompanied by two photos (see *Screenshot 4*). The first one showcases the beneficiaries of the raised money, whilst the second gives a visual demonstration of the mentioned artwork. The combination of these two photos serves to offer a visual link between the firm's achievement in social change (i.e. money raised for the refugees and asylum seekers) and the promoted artwork (i.e. the sculpture placed within blocks of abandoned apartments), which is primarily responsible for raising the aforementioned money. This further substantiates the aforementioned self-claimed qualification (i.e. 'vital work'). From an OIM perspective, it is vital to note that this post publicizes not only the firm's thirst for social change (i.e. 'social responsibility'), but also the firm's achievement of undertaking social change (i.e. 'professionalism').

The final example demonstrates an uncommon collaboration between generalising and substantialising. In this case, C6 exemplifies how the self-depiction is substantiated by the expertise of the key project members:

*‘Join us at 6.30 pm tonight to discover new poetry by acclaimed poets [poet A], @ [poet B] and [poet C] [link to the project’s web page]’  
(30/03/2017)*

In this tweet, the firm generalises the qualification of one of its initiated projects (i.e. a poem-reading workshop) by using the phrases ‘discover new poetry’ to symbolises ‘creativity’ and ‘acclaimed poets’ to signify ‘professionalism’ (i.e. experts are involved). Unlike examples given above, no evidence base is attached to explicitly substantiate how the mentioned poets are ‘acclaimed’. In doing so, audiences without relevant background (i.e. people who have little knowledge of poetry) may not be fully informed of what to expect out of the workshop. However, the tweet is followed by a link to an article on the firm’s official website in which further justifications of how the featured poets are ‘acclaimed’ are provided. Extracts of this article is provided below as they are constructed to substantiate the professionalism of the featured poets:

**Table 25: Expertise of the Key Members**

| Key Member                  | Expertise  | Associated Organisational Impression |
|-----------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| Poet A                      | <i>‘[poet A]’s writing appears in print, multimedia exhibits, as lyrics, installations and on stage’</i>   | Professionalism                      |
| Poet B                      | <i>‘[Poet B] won first place in the 2016 Bridport Prize. He has received a Northern Writer’s Award from New Writing North and was 2016’s Apprentice Poet in Residence at Ilkley Literature Festival’</i> | Professionalism                      |
| Poet C                      | <i>‘[One of poet C’s works] was shortlisted for the Forward Best Collection Prize 2015 and the Roehampton Poetry Prize 2016’</i>   | Professionalism                      |
| Three Poets as a Collective | <i>‘The poets were selected by LJMU Creative writing lecturers...’</i>   | Creativity                           |

Although the quotes taken from the article is not explicitly present in the body of this tweet, it is still accessible to audiences if they click on the link provided. Thus, this is considered as an implicit way of substantiating self-claimed qualifications. As a

result, from a strategic point of view, this post exemplifies the combination of generalising and implicit substantialising.

### **6.3.2 External Acknowledgement**

Apart from presenting self-acknowledged qualifications, an alternative has also emerged from the data that sample firms are also prone to addressing qualifications that are externally acknowledged. In this case, being externally acknowledged signals that the qualifications are acknowledged by external entities. These external entities mainly refer to 1) media outlets such as local newspapers, 2) institutions or individuals that claim authority in the profession such as ‘The Turner Prize’ (i.e. an annual prize presented to a British visual artist), and 3) audiences such as show viewers. Such external acknowledgement is mainly emphasised in two aspects: 1) credibility of the external entity (i.e. to what extent the external entity is positively viewed by the SMEs’ target audiences); 2) external rationalisation (i.e. the way external acknowledgement is rationalised by the external entity); and 3) underpinning external environment (i.e. how a firm’s external environment is rationalised by others). It is worth noting that the qualifications underscored in the first two aspects mainly refer to a firm’s organisational offerings (i.e. the products/services it delivers to its target audiences) and hence the qualifications are central to a firm’s performance. Nonetheless, the third aspect exclusively underpins the qualifications that are relatively more ‘marginalised’ than organisational offerings. These relatively ‘marginalised’ qualifications are mostly associated with a firm’s location (i.e. the geographical area where the firm is established), industry (i.e. the type of business undertaken by the firm), facility (i.e. the equipment to fuel the firm’s trading activities), and affiliation (i.e. the larger cohort of which the firm claims membership). The following sections will address these three aspects respectively.

### 6.3.2.1 Credibility of the External Entity

A specific example that prioritises the renown of the qualification-acknowledging entity is **C4**. As clearly revealed below, the entity that is used to certify the qualification is a local newspaper:

*‘[A local newspaper] has got your next week sorted’ (14/08/2016)*

This newspaper is a locally renowned news outlet that has a history of more than 130 years (launched in 1879). Therefore, this newspaper has an extensive reader base in Liverpool and Merseyside. Since the prestige of the newspaper is well received by the citizens (who are also **C4**’s target audiences), it is needless to address how credible the newspaper is.

**C4** also exemplifies how its commissioned artwork is recognised by the industrial authority. The following quote has been extracted from **C4**’s Facebook account:

*‘This beautiful mural is made using cut-out tiles by [a local organisation], the Turner Prize-winning collaboration between [a renowned art organisation] and [a local area] residents. [C4] has commissioned the artwork for [C4’s major programme in 2016]...’ (14/06/2016)*

In this case, the emphasis is placed on the fact that the promoted artwork has been awarded ‘the Turner Prize’. This is simply because ‘the Turner Prize’ upholds a widely accepted reputation in the UK’s art sector and hence the significance of winning the prize can also be resonated by the bulk of **C4**’s target audience on social media (i.e. people who show a strong interest in art).

An implication can be drawn from the above examples. If the credibility of the external entity is extensively appreciated by the bulk of the firm’s target audience, such credibility also extends to the firm’s organisational offerings. In other words, under this circumstance, the firm can capitalise on the credibility of the external entity.

### 6.3.2.2 External Rationalisation

Under the circumstance where the external entity does not uphold a strong credibility among the firm's target audience, the emphasis is often shifted to elaborating how the qualification is rationalised by the external entity. In doing so, direct quotations are frequently used to explicitly present the first-hand insights from the external entity. A salient example has been captured from the Facebook profile of **C1**. As implied in its manifesto, the firm is dedicated to propelling creativity out of both emerging and established artists:

*'[C1] produces cutting edge, cross art form performances that encourage established artists to work outside their comfort zone in unusual places and spaces' (C1).*

It is clear that 'outside comfort zone' and 'unusual places and spaces' are indicators of the firm's pursuit for creativity and this pursuit is directly publicized on the firm's Facebook profile (on the top left corner of **C1**'s Facebook homepage and hence can be seen at first sight by audiences visiting the homepage). As shown below, **C1**'s status presents a direct quote from a magazine themed around theatre to indicate the firm's pursuit for creativity as it is deemed as 'a national pioneer':

*'Dedicated to the development of artists, artforms and arts in the community. 'A national pioneer' [a magazine themed around theatre]'*  
(Facebook profile)

This is a rarely seen usage of external acknowledgement in the social media profile. A normal approach to give a brief introduction of the firm is presenting self-claimed qualifications. The following example shows how SMEs alternatively present their organisational status:

*'C5 is a Liverpool-based art gallery and cinema and is the UK's leading organisation for the commission, exhibition and support of new media art-forms' (Facebook profile); and*

*‘C5 Liverpool-based gallery & cinema dedicated to art, film, tech & media. Come in, get snapping & share. New show [the show’s name] now open. [Link to C5’s website]’* (Instagram profile)

The quotes shown above feature profiles copied down from the two most regularly updated social media platforms (i.e. Facebook and Instagram) of **C5**. It is clear that although different narratives are used, none of these statuses are strategized by soliciting support from an external entity. However, it is arguable that ‘a national pioneer’, that is, a rather vague commentary, can justify **C1**’s qualification of being creativity-led because no substantial activities have been elaborated here. Due to the word limit, it is probably a good starting point to project the desired image to the firm’s audiences.

As similar to what is presented in **C1**’s Facebook status, direct quotations have been extensively adopted in social media posts to externally justify a firm’s qualification. First, the data indicates attempts made by SMEs to single out the external media commentaries they think that may best rationalise their qualifications and appeal to the audiences. For example, the commentary highlighted below certainly points out the artistic quality (i.e. ‘provocative, relevant and sometimes silly’) and capacity (i.e. ‘masses to see’) of the event promoted by **C4**:

*‘‘The subject of work is provocative, relevant and sometimes silly; and there’s masses to see.’ Have you visited the [C4’s major programme in 2016] Fringe?’* (16/08/2016)

Such a commentary has been provided by an art magazine. Thus, this is, to some degree, an industrial review (i.e. made by professionals) that is likely to have an established authority and hence draw attention from the audiences who have a strong interest in arts.

Moreover, direct quotes have also been used to reflect opinions from audiences who have been involved in some of the events organised by sample firms. The following

quote best exemplifies how the firms showcase the compliments from their audiences (i.e. show viewers in this case) on social media:

*‘We’ve had some brilliant responses to [C3’s programme]. Here are just a few:*

*‘Very polished performance with startling facts and figures’*

*Fast paced, beautifully delivered and really hard hitting material. A truly exceptional cast who have obviously been well supported in developing the necessary performance skills to allow the messages of the work to come through. A really inspiring piece that reminds us to be responsible for the things we think we don’t have time for’*

*‘Wonderful acting. It did make me cry’*

*‘The singing and rocking music were great’*

*‘The cast where incredible’*

*‘I wasn’t expecting the show to be as factual and I wasn’t expecting to gain actual knowledge of the issues today’ (05/12/2016)*

This way of using direct quotes emphasises the desired images that are associated with the commentaries (e.g. professionalism as in *‘truly exceptional cast who have obviously been well supported in developing the necessary performance skills...’*). Audiences presumably find more convincing the compliments from their peers as they share the same identity and hence a word-of-mouth effect is produced which is regarded as the most efficacious way to convince social media audiences (BrightLocal, 2014).

Moreover, the data also indicates that direct quotations are displayed in the form of retweeting tweets from industrial practitioners. The following example best exemplifies such a form of direct quotations:

## **C2 Retweeted**

*‘[C2’s project] at @ [C2’s Twitter account] was funny, intimate & full of heart. A lovely, handmade way to spend a Saturday night. #Cardboard’ (29/01/2017); and*



*‘Watched #spongeshow @ [C2’s Twitter account] with the #minione #joyful #funful and #spongeful’ (07/11/2016)*

According to the above example, **C2** retweeted two compliments from two individuals that had participated in the mentioned activities (i.e. watched the show and attended the event). It is noteworthy that these two individuals are both practitioners in the art industry (i.e. the one on the left is an artist and project manager whilst the one on the right is an art campaigner) so that their opinions are credible in a sense that the credibility stems from their expertise and experience of working in the industry. Meanwhile, they, as individuals whose personal information is accessible on social media, are less likely to risk their own reputation by endorsing qualifications that are not recognised by the bulk of the audiences. In this sense, this approach may outperform simply showcasing audience compliments in terms of generating word-of-mouth effect on social media (Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013) and hence **C2** certainly benefits from such form of interaction with practitioners in the same industry.

### **6.3.2.3 Underpinning External Environment**

The data also indicates that sample firms are inclined to underpin how their external environment are acknowledged by external entities. Such external environment synthesized from the data includes location (i.e. the geographical area where the firm is located), industry (i.e. the sector of the economy in which the firm is established), facility (i.e. the tangible assets possessed by the firm), and affiliation (i.e. the status of the firm as being an integral part of a larger cohort). These types of external environment are considered as an insightful facet of organisational qualifications since the appealing qualities of external environment are likely to render positive how the firm is viewed by its audience. **Table 26** specifies and exemplifies what substantially constitutes the underpinned external environment.

**Table 26: Types of Underpinned External Environment**

| External Environment | Description   | Examples   | External entity involved to rationalise the environment                              | Main organisational impressions associated with the environment |
|----------------------|---|--|--|---|
| Location             | Promote the appreciated features of the city where the firm is located      | <i>'10 reasons Lonely Planet should have made Liverpool a place to visit in 2017' – an article shared by C8 on Twitter</i>   | a locally renowned newspaper   | Attractiveness  |
|                      |   | <i>'Liverpool's music had a strong impact on me – [a renowned artist] speaks to [a website]' – an interview shared by C4 on Facebook</i>   | a website that provides cultural information of Liverpool                            |   |
| Industry             | Emphasize the significance of the firm's industry to the collective society | <i>'RT [a local MP] in the music room today outlining plans to increase access to arts and culture #loveculture' – a piece of news retweeted by C8 on Twitter</i>  | A local MP (a government official)   | Social responsibility   |
| Facility             | Demonstrate the acclaimed features of the firm's facilities                 | <i>'It's not a dead space...It's a place where art is made. Read the @ [a webzine themed around music]article about our 2017 plans: [link to this article]' – an article shared by C6 on Twitter</i>   | a webzine that introduces Liverpool's music  | Attractiveness  |
| Affiliation          | Proclaim to be a constructive member of a larger cohort in the profession   | <i>'[C3] facilitated drama workshops at the 8th [a collective of organisations] at the weekend. It was a real celebration of people's achievement in recovery and a privilege to be involved.' – a collaged photo shared by C3 on Facebook</i> | an organisation that annually celebrates the achievements of individuals in recovery | Social responsibility   |

## 6.4 Relationship-Oriented Strategies

The data indicates that sample firms are in constant pursuit of positive relationships with key stakeholders. This broad set of strategies consists of 1) a series of practices intended to render positive the firms' relationships (i.e. SMEs' efforts to establish, maintain, and improve the relationships) with the other entities on social media; and 2) emphasis placed on the rationalisation of how positive the relationships are (i.e. the extent to which the linkage is perceived in a positive light). The former is self-focused as it prioritises the SMEs' self-initiated efforts in positivizing the relationships with others. Meanwhile, the latter is other-focused as it serves to make sense of the connection with the positively related entities so that the target audiences can be convinced. These two strategies will be interpreted and exemplified next.

#### 6.4.1 Ingratiation (Positivizing Relationships)

The data suggests that positivizing relationships with target audiences is mainly materialised through ‘ingratiation’, a multifaceted strategy that incorporates four mechanisms: ‘flattery’, ‘opinion conformity’, ‘self-presentation’, and ‘favour rendering’. It is noteworthy that where ‘ingratiation’ emerges, the related individuals/organisations are not explicitly reputable in a sense that the related entities do not possess a household renown. Put differently, sample firms are unlikely to benefit immensely from addressing the positivity of the related entities. However, such entities do exert an impact on how others perceive the SMEs as they certainly contribute to the enhancement of organisational images projected on social media (Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013; Walther & Parks, 2002). These entities include ordinary social media users (e.g. people who show interest in the firm’s events), participants (e.g. individuals who are deeply involved in the firm’s activities), and partners (e.g. organisations in collaboration with the firm in previous projects). *Table 27* outlines the definition of each mechanism and the contexts where the mechanism is utilised:

***Table 27: Different Mechanisms of Ingratiation (Positivizing Relationships)***

| Mechanism                 | Definition   | Contexts where the mechanism is implemented   | Main organisational impressions associated with the mechanism |
|---------------------------|--|---|---|
| <b>Flattery</b>           | Compliment target audiences; express admiration of their achievements and for the person; in a few occasions exaggerate their positive attributes; showcase that the organisation likes, respects, and trusts them | Praise the work done by the related others  | Attractiveness<br>Professionalism<br>Creativity               |
| <b>Opinion Conformity</b> | Comply with the opinions of target audiences; demonstrate that the organisation upholds similar beliefs and values; avoid challenging their assertions   | Share articles that convey strong views towards certain political/social issues and mobilise target audiences to take immediate actions to tackle the relevant problem (these shared views must not be controversial in a sense that does not conform to the prevailing social norms)<br>Avoid confrontations by not responding to people who have left negative comments | Attractiveness<br>Social<br>Responsibility                    |
| <b>Self-Presentation</b>  |  | Express gratitude to participants or partners for the work they have done   | Attractiveness<br>Professionalism                             |

|                         |  |  |                                   |
|-------------------------|--|--|-----------------------------------|
|                         | Present oneself in a way that target audiences will appreciate;  | Present specific greetings (e.g. birthday) or express general good wishes to someone who <u>is positively linked with the organisation</u><br>Make apologies publically for accidental problems that are mainly experienced by the audience such as breakdown of a web server and cancellation of a show |                                   |
| <b>Favour-Rendering</b> | Provide actual assistance to cater to the needs of target audiences; showcase the organisation's ability to support them | Respond immediately to audience enquiries on social media (this usually takes the form of <u>comments</u> )<br>Portray the behaviour of 'help-seeking' as reciprocal (this is normally used to recruit participants for a particular project or promote a certain training programme)                    | Attractiveness<br>Professionalism |

#### 6.4.1.1 Flattery

**C1** presents a typical example of 'flattery'. As revealed in the quote below, the firm shows appreciation of people who have applied for its ongoing project by using vocabularies such as 'amazing' and 'love them all' and indicates sincerity in its appreciation by stating 'not just saying' at the end:

*'Oh my... decisions are soooooooooooooo hard! Amazing turnout of applications for [C1's major programme in 2017]. Love them all! Not just saying' (28/03/2017)*

It is believed that this helps to forge the relationship with all job applicants as 1) some of them will be recruited and it is vital to have a harmonious relationship with future co-workers; and 2) the rest of them will be denied the job opportunity and it is also imperative not to discourage them for future employment (i.e. the use of the phrase 'decisions are soooooooooooooo hard' suggests that all candidates are competitive).

It becomes crucial to distinguish between 'flattery' and 'self-acknowledgement'. The following example is thematised as 'flattery', whereas the example found in **C8** (illustrated in *Section 6.3.1*) is thematised as 'self-acknowledgement', although they both have some shared grounds (i.e. they both display vocabularies used to compliment works done by others):

*'Great to meet @ [C2's partner] Alan this week. Amazing artworks from interesting characters... There's a tale to be told there' (16/12/2016)*

In this particular case, **C2** shows admiration of the artworks (i.e. paintings) produced by a member of a cooperating organisation (i.e. a collective group constituted by local painters). It is worth highlighting that **C2** had no influence over the production of the admired artworks (as indicated in its manifesto, **C2** specialises in ‘puppetry, mask work, and animation’ which seemingly share very little in common with the specialty of the mentioned partner) so that the artworks cannot be regarded as a true reflection of the firm’s qualification (at least the causality, if there is one, is not explicitly revealed in the narrative of this tweet). Thus, the OIM behaviours shown above is relationship-oriented (i.e. this is intended to forge a good relationship with another organisation by promoting its work and vice-versa so that both organisations can capitalise on each other’s audience base). On the contrary, the activity covered in the section of ‘self-acknowledgement’ is the direct result of **C8**’s core learning programme and hence this certainly reflects its qualifications in developing children’s musical skills. Consequently, the OIM endeavours shown earlier is qualification-oriented.

#### **6.4.1.2 Opinion Conformity**

The first context where opinion conformity is adopted is as follows:

*‘Shocked by the anti-homeless slopes put up in Liverpool last week? If you have other examples of Hostile Architecture, send your pictures to [national media] and help them to document this horrible practice’  
(30/11/2016)*

### Screenshot 5



As indicated in the case above, **C3** echoes media critics over anti-homeless architecture and mobilises its audiences into actions to expose the ‘horrible practice’. It is notable that such critics comply with both 1) the prevailing societal norms towards vulnerable people; and 2) the firm’s proclaimed social responsibility (e.g. ‘theatre to contribute to genuine social change’ as quoted from its manifesto).

Nonetheless, there are situations where some audiences do not agree with opinions publicised by SMEs. For instance, a comment has been left to counter **C4**’s promoted concept of contemporary art:

*‘What a pile of crap!! They tell the story of contemporary art as cheap spectacle and marketing porn!’ (C4)*

As in the other similar occasions, **C4** decided not to respond to such negative comments in order to avoid being dragged into a length debate with audiences that had already showed aggression (i.e. the use of vocabularies such as ‘crap’).

Also, **C5** sparked a heated discussion among its audiences over the firm’s controversial collaboration with a foreign celebrity activist to oppose against a foreign politician. Such a performing artefact has been disputed by many Facebook users and some of them clearly criticised the firm’s act by saying *‘This is not art, this is*

*cowardice*' (C5). As a result, C5 chose not to respond to these critics to avoid confrontations with audiences and escalation of this controversial issue which could easily go viral on social media.

#### **6.4.1.3 Self-Presentation**

The first context pertains to expressing gratitude to anyone who has offered help. The following cases exemplify how these two firms communicate their gratitude to their audiences:

*'Thanks for passing it on! @ [C1's partner]'* (19/03/2017); and

*'THANK YOU. To our amazing visitors and the city of Liverpool, our artists, partners, volunteers and everyone who made [C4's major programme in 2016] so very special.'*

*Farewell and see you again in 2018 to celebrate 20 years of [C4]'*  
(19/10/2016)

It is worth noting that the combination of expressing gratitude and flattery is prevalent in this context because sample firms are often inclined to publicize the reason why the related entity (i.e. 'visitors, city of Liverpool, our artists, partners, volunteers and everyone' in this case) has been thanked. In doing so, the company tends to enhance the positive features of the appreciated entities (i.e. 'made [hashtag of C4's major programme in 2016] so very special' in this case). More importantly, the last sentence of the post also unveils the motivation of expressing gratitude and flattery: to sustain a good relationship from which the firm will possibly benefit in the future (i.e. 'see you again in 2018').

The second context refers to the expression of greetings/good wishes. First, the following example features a festive greeting from C5 (i.e. 'happy #stpattricksday from [C5]'). What is worth highlighting is that the post features the firm's logo that is recoloured to evoke an ambiance of the festival (i.e. from orange to green) and hence entertain the audiences.

*'Happy #stpatricksday from [C5] #liverpool #gunness #green #ireland'*  
(17/03/2017)

Additionally, expression of good wishes is often fully loaded with the purpose of promoting events for the related entity. In this case, they tend to collaborate together to capitalise on each other's audience base (i.e. to reach a wider group of people) and such a collaboration pervades SMEs' social media postings such as what has been suggested in the first case below:

*'Good luck to [C6's partner] with the tour of his exhibition [the exhibition's name], which opens at @ [a venue for exhibition] later this week'* (28/03/2017); and

*'[C7's programme] continues this evening, with talented young teams from [C7's partner] performing [a theatrical play] and [C7's partner] performing [a theatrical play] Break a leg to all involved!'* (24/03/2017)

Specifically, while promoting a partner's exhibition, **C6** presented the message in a courteous way (i.e. 'good luck to...') so that the related partner can, in return, promote **C6's** shows in the future. The second case suggests a slightly varied situation as **C7** expressed good wishes (i.e. 'break a leg to all involved') to all the people working on its own project (which was being promoted by this Facebook post). So, the good wish was directed at the internal members of the promoted project. To conclude, expression of good wishes in this case is merely used to 'polish' or render courtesy the promotion of events.

More importantly, expression of greetings in some occasions is also used to render courtesy the achievements of the related party. In both situations presented below, **C7** congratulated (i.e. 'congratulations to...') the figures that are positively related to the firm (e.g. 'who played...in our...').

*'Congratulations to the talented @ [actor who took part in C7's play], who played [theatre character] in our [hashtag for C7's play]!'*  
(29/03/2017); and



*‘Yay! Some slightly blurry pics, but congratulations to the young scout cast of [hashtag for a play] who won this year’s MTA for [award A], and to [hashtag for C7’s play] cast, crew and design team for winning [award B] and [award C]. All very well deserved!’ (17/03/2017)*

However, both posts, apart from demonstrating a good relationship between the firm and its internal members (i.e. cast members), are mainly intended to showcase the qualification of the show initiated by the firm (the first case exerts a more subtle effect as the achievement it mentions is exclusive to the person congratulated; whereas the second exerts a more robust effect as the award won is also an achievement of **C7** which firmly reflects the company’s qualification in show production).

The last context of self-presentation is making apologies. This occurs when there is some incident that impedes the delivering of the firm’s service (i.e. cancellation of a show in this case). The apology reflected below is addressed by stating ‘we regret to inform you...’ and ‘we are sorry for...’ in both the photo and text of **C2**’s Instagram:

*‘Cancelled show: [reason why the show was cancelled]  
...we are so sorry for any disappointment that this may have caused one of the best loved classics for children comes to life, literally’ (05/02/2017)*

It is noteworthy that this post capitalises on the functional distinctiveness of the social media platform (i.e. Instagram on which photos are the main posting feature) by ‘brushing’ (i.e. a sentence – ‘we regret to inform you that this show has been cancelled please see details’ – was photoshopped onto the original poster in strikingly bright yellow) the apology onto the poster of this cancelled show so that the message is easier to be spotted.

#### **6.4.1.4 Favour Rendering**

The most straightforward way for sample firms to do a favour for their audiences is facilitating user requests. The following quotes illustrate how **C4** replies to user comments in order to clarify confusions regarding the ongoing event:

*[Audience A]: Oooh what building is that? Beautiful doors!*

*[C4]: It is indeed! [Location of the doors].*

*[Audience A]: Oh lovely! I didn't make that part of [C4's major programme in 2016] when I came through but I will have to check out the building.'* (16/08/2016); and

*'[Audience B]: I really want to see this – would it be safe to bring a small child or a pram?*

*[C4]: Hi [name of audience B], great news! A pram would probably be fine through the entrance to the reservoir is quite narrow so I would say you might struggle with a large one. There are attendants, who could look after the pram if you wanted to carry your child.*

*[C4]: Please be aware that the piece is only open 10am -6pm on Saturdays and Sundays. Let us know what you think.'* (07/08/2016)

It is vital to note that the firm does not always reply to user comments. Those comments that have been replied should conform to a few criteria including 1) they are positively tuned (critics with detectable aggression will be left unanswered; discussed in Opinion Conformity); 2) they contain questions about the ongoing project (e.g. 'what building is that?' and 'would it be safe to bring a small child or a pram?'); and 3) they show interest in participating the event (e.g. 'I'm interested' replied by **C4** with information about the accessibility of the event). Other comments, some of which are even sheer compliments towards the firm's artworks, have not been facilitated. As a consequence, the data suggests that favour rendering is largely used to increase the attendance of the promoted event.

The data indicates a fairly distinctive use of favour-rendering that is primarily associated with the narrative when SMEs are seeking recruitment. As demonstrated below, **C4** portrays the need of recruiting participants in a way that the recruits are also beneficiaries of such a recruiting process (i.e. 'have a fantastic opportunity'):

*'We have a fantastic opportunity for an experienced curator to join our team...'* (26/11/2016)

In other words, the firm depicts the recruitment as mutually beneficial rather than needy and dependent as suggested in the existing OIM literature in which organisations with the purpose of soliciting support from others, are inclined to showcase the weaknesses and limitations (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). Thus, in this case, the firm also phrases the process of seeking help from its audiences as also the process of offering help to its audiences.

#### **6.4.2 Positivity of the Relationship**

The data reveals that sample firms tend to underscore the positivity of the link with the entities that are positively perceived by their target audiences on social media. Since such positivity is widely resonated with by their target audiences, sample firms, with relatively no need to make known the prestige of the related entity, are often inclined to explain why the relationship is positive. The most predominant way to do so is to make sense of the practical interplay between a firm and its related entities (i.e. how the interaction between the two sides takes place). In this case, the related entities refer to individuals/organisations/productions that are positively viewed by a firm's target audience such as celebrities, award-winning artists, and milestone productions. They are either locally (i.e. popular in the region) or professionally (i.e. well-known in the industry) renowned.

Taking **C3** and **C4** as an example, according to the posts demonstrated below (i.e. quote and **Screenshot 6**), the focal firms both claim a good relationship with the two established figures:

*'We're auctioning 2 @Liverpool FC matchday progs, signed by @ [a footballer's Twitter account] to fundraise for our [C3's project]'*  
(13/12/2016)

*'The queen of Polka' [emojicons] – who exhibited with us in 2008 – has a fair bit going on around the world right now. [Followed by a picture of the designer and a news article]* (14/11/2016)

These two individuals mentioned in the posts are both positively perceived among the target audiences of these two firms (i.e. the footballer is extensively loved by local residents whereas the designer is widely idolised by art fans). Thus, these two firms place their emphasis on how positive the addressed relationships are: the relationships in these two instances are presented as collaborative.

Furthermore, **C8** is seen to make efforts to self-create a relationship between a milestone production in the relevant industry and its own promotion and also rationalise the created relationship. As displayed in the following quote and *Screenshot 6*, **C8** manages to capitalise on the relationship between the drama film promoted by **C8** and the prestigious TV drama which was first broadcast in 1966.

*‘Similarities, no coincidence? We screen [name of the promoted film] tomoz 50 years to the day [associated TV drama] was 1st broadcast’  
(15/11/2016)*

***Screenshot 6***



Such a relationship is claimed and rationalised based on a few similarities between the two films including coincidence of screen time (i.e. ‘...tomoz 50 years to the day...’), similarity of topics (i.e. unemployment and homelessness), and visual resemblance between the two photos (i.e. both feature the main characters walking home). The firm may, by underpinning these similarities, take advantage of such a formulated linkage so that it explicitly highlights the projected organisational impression (i.e.

social responsibility) and it may attract the audience members who have shown an interest in the topic of the old film.

## 6.5 Summary

In order to answer **RQ2** (i.e. what OIM strategies do SMEs employ on social media?), a taxonomy that consists of two main sets of OIM strategies, namely, qualification-oriented and relationship-oriented strategies, as illustrated in **Table 28**, have been identified. The first set of OIM strategies is centred on organisational qualifications, which primarily reflect SMEs' intent to demonstrate how qualified they are in offering products/services. This set of strategies can be implemented by addressing qualifications that are either self-claimed (i.e. 'self-acknowledgement') or externally endorsed (i.e. 'external acknowledgement'). It is noteworthy that the former solely involves no other but the firm itself to perpetuate a particular impression, whereas the latter associates with external entities such as newspapers to help foster a desired impression. The second set of OIM strategies reflects SMEs' preference of underscoring their social relationships with key stakeholders. This set of strategies is implemented by either rendering positive SMEs' linkage with key stakeholders on social media, or making sense of the positivity of the featured relationships. It is worth highlighting that the former pertains to SMEs' self-initiated endeavours to establish, maintain, and improve their relationships with key stakeholders such as customers, whilst the latter aims to justify how positive their relationships are with the external parties that are positively viewed by their key stakeholders such as celebrities. The next chapter presents the findings based on the data collected from key informant interviews.

**Table 28: Summary of OIM Strategies Employed by SMEs on Social Media**

| SMEs      | OIM Strategies   |   |  |  |
|-----------|--|---|--|--|
|           | Qualification-Oriented Strategies  |   | Relationship-Oriented Strategies   |  |
|           | Self-Acknowledgement   | External Acknowledgement  | Ingratiation (Positivising Relationships)  | Positivity of the Relationship   |
| <b>C1</b> | <i>‘What are you doing this weekend? Time to apply to #[C1’s training programme] Why wait? extraordinary work by extraordinary emerging artists’ (19/03/2017)</i>  | <i>‘Dedicated to the development of artists, artforms and arts in the community. ‘A national pioneer’ [a magazine themed around theatre]’ (C1’s Facebook profile)</i>   | <i>‘Oh my... decisions are soooooo hard! Amazing turnout of applications for [C1’s major programme in 2017]. Love them all! Not just saying’ (28/03/2017)</i>  | <i>‘A bit last minute, but please don’t miss this – [a former participant of C1’s training programme], one of C1’s dazzling actors, will star in [a prestigious play]...’ (06/03/2017)</i>           |
| <b>C2</b> | <i>‘Everyone enjoying the brilliant musical entertainment at the #[a puppet festival hosted by C2]’ (03/08/2016) alongside several photos showing that everyone is enjoying the show</i>   | <i>‘[C2’s project] at @ [C2’s Twitter account] was funny, intimate &amp; full of heart. A lovely, handmade way to spend a Saturday night. #Cardboard’ (29/01/2017)</i>  | <i>‘Great to meet @ [C2’s partner] Alan this week. Amazing artworks from interesting characters... There’s a tale to be told there’ (16/12/2016)</i>   | <i>‘Great to be a part of [a well-known local arts event] 1st-2nd October...check out our offer at [C2’s venue]’. (22/09/2016)</i>   |
| <b>C3</b> | <i>‘Join us for our exciting theatre conference this September #[a link to the theatre conference hosted by C3]’ (10/07/2016)</i>  | <i>‘We’ve had some brilliant responses to [C3’s programme]. Here are just a few: ‘Very polished performance with startling facts and figures’ Fast paced, beautifully delivered and really hard hitting material...’ (05/12/2016)</i> | <i>‘Shocked by the anti-homeless slopes put up in Liverpool last week? If you have other examples of Hostile Architecture...’ (30/11/2016) Alongside a link to a news article with regard to the aforementioned ‘Hostile Architecture’ (see <b>Screenshot 5</b> for details)</i> | <i>‘We’re auctioning 2 @Liverpool FC matchday progs, signed by @ [a footballer’s Twitter account] to fundraise for our [C3’s project]’ (13/12/2016)</i>  |
| <b>C4</b> | <i>‘Looking to give or own contemporary art? Have a look at our beautiful limited editions...’ (26/11/2016) Alongside a short video clip demonstrating the aforementioned ‘limited editions’ (see <b>Screenshot 1</b> for details)</i>                 | <i>‘[A local newspaper] has got your next week sorted’ attached below an article promoting C4’s project (14/08/2016)</i>  | <i>‘THANK YOU. To our amazing visitors and the city of Liverpool, our artists, partners, volunteers and everyone who made [C4’s major programme in 2016] so very special. Farewell and see you again in 2018 to celebrate 20 years of [C4]’ (19/10/2016)</i>                     | <i>‘The queen of Polka’ [emoicons] – who exhibited with us in 2008 – has a fair bit going on around the world right now. [Followed by a picture of the designer and a news article] (14/11/2016)</i> |
| <b>C5</b> | <i>‘Catch this amazing documentary this evening at [C5]! (19/04/2017) alongside a link to the promoted documentary</i>   | <i>‘RT @[two renowned media outlets] presenting in [a famous venue] on the impact of new technologies in the arts &amp; the example of [C5]...’ (15/03/2017)</i>  | <i>‘Happy #stpatrikssday from [C5] #liverpool #gunness #green #ireland’ (17/03/2017)</i>   | <i>‘Excited to announce our next exhibition in collaboration with [a science &amp; research centre]...’ (13/04/2017)</i>   |
| <b>C6</b> | <i>‘Lots of movement &amp; creativity for Family Day today join us tomorrow from 1-4 PM for more free activities for all the family’ (25/03/2017) Alongside a collaged photo substantiating the aforementioned ‘lots of movement &amp; creativity’</i> | <i>‘It’s not a dead space...It’s a place where art is made. Read the @ [a webzine themed around music] article about our 2017 plans: [link to this article]’ – an article shared by C6 on Twitter</i>                                 | <i>‘Good luck to [C6’s partner] with the tour of his exhibition [the exhibition’s name], which opens at @ [a venue for exhibition] later this week’ (28/03/2017)</i>   | <i>‘Did you know that [a renowned artist] and [C6] go back 30 years, to when he exhibited in [this artist’s show in C6], [C6]...’ (20/12/2016)</i>   |

|           |   |  |   |   |
|-----------|---|--|---|---|
| <b>C7</b> | <p><i>'We have had such a brilliant journey with this story, with the cast and the creatives...' (22/04/2017)</i></p>   | <p><i>'A fantastic ★★★★★ review from [a magazine themed around theatre] for [C7's show]!' You can see this 'immersive, engrossing and thrilling' production here...'</i> (07/04/2017) alongside a link to the review</p> | <p><i>'Congratulations to the talented @ [actor who took part in C7's play], who played [theatre character] in our [hashtag for C7's play]!' (29/03/2017)</i></p> | <p><i>'Run Michael, run! Today is the day Michael runs the #[a famous sports event] for our work here at [C7]. He has already smashed his original target of raising £750, and we are so excited to see him take on the first challenge event for [C7]...' (22/04/2017)</i></p> |
| <b>C8</b> | <p><i>'Brilliant! @ [C8's other Twitter account for this particular learning programme] RT @ [C8's partner's Twitter account]: Christmas arrived in 1P yesterday! #StarsInTheMaking' (05/12/2016)</i></p> | <p><i>'10 reasons Lonely Planet should have made Liverpool a place to visit in 2017' – an article shared by C8 on Twitter</i></p>  | <p>Replying to [a renowned artist who will perform at C8] <i>'all suggestions welcome [the name of the artist]!' (30/08/2016)</i></p>                             | <p><i>'Similarities, no coincidence? We screen [name of the promoted film] tomoz 50 years to the day [associated TV drama] was 1st broadcast' (15/11/2016) Alongside a picture showcasing the aforementioned 'similarities' (see Screenshot 6 for details)</i></p>              |

## **CHAPTER 7: FINDINGS (ANALYSIS OF KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS)**

### **7.1 Introduction**

*Chapter 6*, with the purpose of answering **RQ2**, presents the findings based on the data collected from the second source – social media postings. This chapter presents the findings based on the data collected from the third source – key informant interviews. In order to answer **RQ3**, the outcome of this analysis features seven organisational qualities affecting SMEs' OIM practice on social media and these qualities are labelled as 'nature of practitioner', 'division of roles and responsibilities', 'work routine', 'work principle', 'evaluation system', 'nature of industry', and 'functionality of social media'. Firstly, an extended description of each sample firm is provided for readers to resonate with the succeeding findings. Secondly, a discussion over how the seven organisational qualities have been synthesized is offered to illuminate how the interview data has been interpreted. Subsequently, the identified qualities are defined, interpreted and empirically exemplified. Finally, a conclusion is given to sum up the whole chapter.

### **7.2 Case Description**

This section features an extended description of each case selected in order to provide more details (in addition to the information regarding sample firms and the interviewees addressed in the methodology chapter, see *Table 16* and *Table 19* for details) for readers to resonate with. This case description embodies three elements that collectively help readers to form a comprehensive understanding of the investigated phenomenon for each case before entering into the findings. These three elements, including content of social media postings (i.e. messages conveyed through social media), target audience (i.e. people they intend to engage on social media), and



perception of OIM (i.e. interviewees' views on OIM) are elaborated in a tabular form as *Table 29* demonstrates.

**Table 29: Extended Information of Sample Firms**

| Case | Main Content of Social Media Postings  | Target Audience on Social Media   | Perceptions of OIM on Social Media*   |
|------|--|---|---|
| C1   | <p>The content, in generic terms, entails: 1) <b>promotion of ongoing events and programmes</b>; 2) <b>outcome of prior events and programmes</b>; and 3) <b>preview of upcoming events and programmes</b> (i.e. <i>'usually I'd post things that I'm working on at the moment; so, for example, could be things that will happen in the future, although I'm working towards it; or things that happened in the past'</i>).</p> <p>The rationale of posting about prior and future events and programmes is maintain a <b>social media presence</b> to increase publicity and awareness (i.e. <i>'I want to keep my presence on a sort of constant basis... So, instead of saying the same thing, you say something else and someone might click and then know who you are, and apply for the things you want them to look at'</i>)</p> | <p>The target audience embodies: 1) <b>the general public</b> (i.e. <i>'I'd like to say everyone'</i>); and 2) <b>users</b> (i.e. <i>'I think [the people we want to engage with are] users'</i>).</p> <p>In particular, C1 likes to engage with <b>show viewers</b> (i.e. <i>'...audience members, coz we do shows, we want audience members to come'</i>). Meanwhile, the term 'users' is defined as the <b>participants</b> of C1's training programme that is designed to cultivate young talents (i.e. <i>'by users I mean other young artists, emerging artists that could become partners or employees'</i>)</p> | <p>The firm holds dear the notions of being <b>'informative'</b> (i.e. <i>'I'm ready, ask me a question'</i>) and <b>'appealing'</b> (i.e. <i>'we want to be viewed as on-point, trendy, and doing interesting things'</i>).</p> <p>Such notions are driven by the intent of <b>attracting young demographics</b> (i.e. <i>'I think young people relate more, or better to that'</i>), and also <b>nature of the industry</b> (i.e. <i>'I think because we are in a business of being playful'</i>).</p> <p>C1's practitioner has <b>little strategic thinking</b> (i.e. <i>'we don't have strategies as you might have gathered'</i>).</p> <p>Although the interviewee reveals that no particular strategy has been used, she argues that there is still a <b>strategic shift</b> from being purely <b>'ad-hoc'</b> (i.e. <i>'Facebook...was used as a website rather than as a live conversation-centric [platform]'</i>), to being more <b>'conversational'</b> (i.e. <i>'[now] we use Twitter to have conversations'</i>). Such a strategic shift has been successful to <b>raise the firm's profile</b> (i.e. <i>'...we grew in last year more than 25% or 30%...'</i>).</p> |
| C2   | <p>The content basically consists of 1) <b>self-initiated events</b>; and 2) <b>other-initiated events</b> (i.e. <i>'events, conversations, community events, our partners' details, what we are looking towards, yeah, just prompting conversations before events'</i>).</p> <p>It is noteworthy that approximately <b>70%</b> of the content is associated with self-initiated projects whereas <b>30%</b> with partners' projects (i.e. C2's venue also hosts shows produced by other theatres outside the area) (i.e. <i>'I'd say probably 70% versus 30%, 30% is we work with partners, such as 'the Lowry', 'Panda' ...if it's feasible, we can bring that show to Rossendale'</i>).</p>   | <p>The target audience denotes mainly <b>local residents</b>, especially <b>Southeast Asia community in Rossendale</b> (i.e. <i>'yeah, local residents... giving back to the local community, so, sometimes, it's what dictates us'; '...working on the Southeast Asia engagement project'</i>).</p>  | <p>The firm most prefers to be viewed as <b>'friendly'</b> and <b>'engaging'</b> as a small, community-centric company (i.e. <i>I want them to come back and say stuff like: [C2] feels like home, it's very friendly...'</i>), as opposed to a large company which is normally <b>'corporate'</b> and <b>'institutionalised'</b> (i.e. <i>'we are trying not to become corporate'</i>).</p>  |
| C3   | <p>The content can be generally divided into two types: 1) <b>promotion of events and programmes</b> (both self- and other-initiated events and programmes); and 2) <b>articles and campaigns</b> (i.e. <i>'The main bulk at the moment...is articles and campaigns...and the relevant work that we do...'</i>)</p> <p>In this case, these two types both serve the purpose of <b>prompting positive social changes</b> (this echoes with C3's nature: <i>'theatre for</i></p>   | <p>The target audience mainly entails two facets:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) <b>The general public with an interest in watching shows</b> (i.e. <i>'If we have a show to sell, we sell it to anybody who would come'</i>); and</li> <li>2) <b>People with certain vulnerabilities and organisations that are able to change the lives of vulnerable people</b></li> </ol>  | <p>Most noticeably, C3 wants to be seen as an <b>'active'</b> company to <b>galvanise people into action</b> (i.e. <i>'we are an active company...encouraging people...to be activists on campaigns that are important to them'</i>). This is a demonstration of the firm's <b>social responsibility</b> (i.e. one of the four identified organisational impressions).</p> <p>The practitioner has <b>little strategic sense</b> regarding OIM practice (i.e. <i>'I never really thought about it'</i>).</p>  |

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|           | <p>social change’) and hence they are both related to certain social issues. For instance, <b>C3</b> has promoted its own production about homelessness on Twitter, whilst it has also shared several articles about rough sleepers.</p>  | <p>(i.e. ‘we’re engaging with...yeah, like I said, vulnerable people, old people, people who don’t typically access the arts and then through that things like health commissions, social services, those types of organization’).</p> <p>Notably, the categorisation of <b>C3</b>’s target audience also stems from its <b>nature of being ‘theatre for social change’</b>. ‘Theatre’ signifies the firm’s focus on art whereas ‘social change’ denotes the firm’s focus on vulnerable people. These two strands are interrelated as <b>C3</b> has made endeavours to encourage vulnerable people to actively participate in art-related activities.</p>   |  |
| <b>C4</b> | <p>The content is twofold: 1) <b>promotion of the art festival and other art projects</b>; and 2) <b>art-related news</b> (i.e. ‘it has to be about art, contemporary art...and then this could vary from highlighting an artwork or an exhibition, or a project through going back to our archive, and finding previous artworks people would remember’).</p> <p>It is worth highlighting that the art-related news entails two fundamental aspects:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) <b>Significant events around the globe</b> (i.e. ‘it can be something important happening in the art world, for instance, the Turner Prize...’) and</li> <li>2) <b>Important events taking place in Liverpool</b> (i.e. ‘if there’s something significant happening on the Liverpool arts scene...that highlights something interesting about Liverpool’s culture, we would share this content’).</li> </ol> <p>Noticeably, the former is associated with <b>C4</b>’s ambition to be viewed as an <b>authority</b> in the industry (i.e. ‘...because we want to be seen as an authority, as a voice in contemporary art’), whilst the latter with <b>C4</b>’s attempt to attract <b>local audience</b> (i.e. ‘...because we think it’s relevant to our audiences’).</p> | <p>The target audience is mainly 1) <b>other individuals and organisations in the field</b>; and 2) <b>the general public with an interest in culture</b> (i.e. ‘both people from the arts world, either the artists or arts professionals; through to those who are just enthusiastic about culture, travel to have a good experience’).</p> <p>The main audience, according to the interviewee, refers to <b>art fans</b> as they maintain deeper engagement with the firm (i.e. ‘the people who are mostly engaged online with what we do directly are the people who already have an interest in arts and culture, because they’re take the extra step of engagement to interact with our Facebook, Twitter and Instagram’).</p> <p>Apart from the main audience, <b>C4</b> also strives to extend its audience base to <b>tourists</b> as some of the firm’s artworks are accessible to them (i.e. ‘we also target families, tourists who are visiting the city who might come across our works’).</p> | <p>The most desirable organisational impression <b>C4</b> wants to project is <b>‘professionalism’</b> (i.e. ‘we want people to know that we present high-quality contemporary art...’).</p> <p>The practitioner acknowledges the <b>strategic transformation</b> on social media (i.e. ‘it’s constantly changing because the way people behave online and what they respond to change through time...so yes, we constantly adapt ourselves in response to this’).</p> |
| <b>C5</b> | <p><b>C5</b> upholds a detailed categorisation of the content posted on social media and it entails:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) <b>Promotion of self-initiated/hosted projects/events/programmes/productions</b> (i.e. ‘information about our artists, information about exhibitions, pushing film content that’s been shown in our</li> </ol>   | <p>According to the interviewee, the content is directed at <b>the general public</b> among which one is prioritised (i.e. ‘...a tinker or a hacker...someone who is really into technology’) because it matches the focal theme of what <b>C5</b> specialises (i.e. crossover between technology and arts).</p>  | <p>The most articulated organisational impression is <b>‘engaging’</b> (i.e. ‘it’s that we are informative...we are a space for people to interact and engage with them’).</p> <p>The practitioner certainly preserves a <b>strategic sense</b> in terms of OIM (i.e. ‘we’re always trying to make a positive impression to all of our audiences’). Nevertheless, <b>no specific strategy</b> has been purposefully</p>  |

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|    | <p><i>cinema, events that have been hosted by [C5], workshops...);</i></p> <p>2) <b>News articles related to art or technology</b> (i.e. <i>'they could be news articles, say, the Guardian about technology'</i>); and</p> <p>3) <b>Interactions with others</b> (i.e. <i>'...obviously retweets on Twitter of people who have mentioned us'</i>).</p>  |  | <p>tailored to projecting specific impressions (i.e. <i>'[our digital strategy is] not necessarily around making good impressions'</i>).</p> <p>The strategic sense can also be reflected in the way that the postings in present are <b>more focused</b> than before (i.e. <i>'our posts were quite sporadic whereas now...it's got much more focus on the exhibitions or things that are going on the building rather than kind of random [C5]-related things'</i>).</p>  |
| C6 | <p>The content is multifaceted:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) <b>Induction of self-produced films</b> (i.e. <i>'in terms of the content side of the things, that can be film'</i>);</li> <li>2) <b>Blogs</b> that serve to promote and supply details for the featured events or exhibitions (i.e. <i>'we write blogs...to give people a bit more context...'</i>);</li> <li>3) <b>Press reviews</b> that serve to showcase external endorsement (i.e. <i>'it can be reviews in newspapers...that's really useful as an endorsement'</i>);</li> <li>4) <b>Imagery</b> (i.e. <i>'...photo galleries, things like that'</i>);</li> <li>5) <b>Interactions with partners</b> (i.e. <i>'we do retweet as well and share posts on Facebook from partners that we work with'</i>); and</li> <li>6) <b>News in the industry</b> (i.e. <i>'we'd also post around things like I said, happening out in the wider world that connect to the theme here'</i>).</li> </ol> <p>Intriguingly, the interviewee reflected that content regarded as <b>'engaging'</b> accounts for approximately 70% of the total posts, whereas content that is more <b>'ad-hoc'</b> for roughly 30% (i.e. <i>'we try to keep it a little bit like a magazine, so we say about 70% content, things that are interesting, informative, or entertaining to read and watch; and then about 30% is advert, so that's more about trying to push more tickets'</i>).</p> | <p><b>'Visitors'</b> is the term used by C6's interviewee to define whom the firm attempts to engage on social media (i.e. <i>'our exhibitions are all free but some other events are in paid forms, so they tend to be visitors'</i>).</p> <p>A clear <b>definition</b> of 'visitors' has also been provided: <i>'people who visit Liverpool, culturally engaged, but not necessarily art experts'</i>. This shows that the firm tends to engage with people who show an interest in visiting the firm's venue.</p> <p>Partners or artists are not the main audience of C6's postings (i.e. <i>'...partners, artists we work with and people like...but they are not really who we are writing it for...'</i>).</p> | <p>It is revealed that there are three organisational impressions C5 favours the most: <b>'engaging'</b>, <b>'professionalism'</b>, and <b>'creativity'</b> (i.e. <i>the impression we want them to have about us is that we are an <b>approachable</b> organisation and an <b>accessible</b> one that we listen...this is a place that has <b>high quality</b> programming as well that what we do is quite <b>unique</b> within the city...'</i>).</p> <p>Nonetheless, OIM is <b>hardly consciously strategized</b> (i.e. <i>'I think we wouldn't incorporate that really into the quality of the posts'</i>). It is mainly <b>intuition-based</b> (i.e. <i>'we'd want them to be drafted correctly...because it looks unprofessional...so we're just doing it in that way really, just moderating the content that goes out'</i>).</p> |
| C7 | <p>The content is threefold:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) <b>Blog content:</b> posts working as a teaser to encourage audience to visit the website to seek more detailed information (i.e. <i>'it's trying to make sure that people go through to our website'</i>);</li> <li>2) <b>News story:</b> posts showcasing the media coverage of the promotions (i.e. <i>'whenever I do a press release...I'll put it up as a news story'</i>); and</li> <li>3) <b>Imagery of production:</b> photos reflecting the production in different phases (e.g. rehearsal) (i.e. <i>'we'll also share rehearsal photos and production photos'</i>).</li> </ol>  | <p>The target audience is defined as general people <b>intrigued by</b> what the firm does (i.e. <i>'anybody who's interested in theatre, or art, or performing, or writing, anything like that'</i>).</p> <p>This conception is based on the core value of the firm, namely, <b>stories</b> (i.e. <i>'we want stories, we want to hear from people'</i>).</p>   | <p>The most favourable organisational impression is <b>'engaging'</b> (i.e. <i>'...it's very much about being very warm and very welcoming... we want other people to just engage with us...'</i>). This is facilitated by the firm's <b>relationship-building acts</b> (i.e. <i>'we want them to be able to share with us... and to tell us what they think... it's just building that relationship with our audience'</i>).</p> <p>Efforts made to project desirable organisational impressions are principally <b>intuition-based</b> (i.e. <i>'I think it's very much ingrained with who I am... I just think for me, it's natural... I don't think that I have to think about it, I just think: 'that is quite [C7], or that doesn't really feel like [C7]'</i>).</p>  |

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|           | <p>According to the interviewee, the content <b>varies</b> across different productions since it is dictated by <b>the nature of each promotion</b> (i.e. <i>'it's very much tailored by the nature of what we are promoting'</i>). For instance, blog content is often used to render different perspectives on the social issue underpinned by the firm's play (i.e. <i>'with 'Ashes', we did a lot of blog content, about what other people have written about the issues that were in the play'</i>).</p>   |   | <p>The firm still upholds a strategic sense by <b>self-assessing the rationale of each post</b> (i.e. <i>'...the way we achieve that is actually by making sure that everything we do is kind of bespoke to that... that's why we have meetings...[questioning] is this the right content to create?'</i>).</p> <p>Driven by the intent of being 'engaging', OIM practice has evolved from being <b>'factual'</b> (i.e. <i>'it was more ad-hoc, it wasn't fun'</i>) to having a <b>'personality'</b> (i.e. <i>'this is fun, this is welcoming, this is creative'</i>).</p> |
| <b>C8</b> | <p>Apart from the promotion of the firm's own music productions (<b>C8</b> owns a venue to accommodate for concerts), the content should be:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) <b>Visualised</b>, in a way that features children in particular (i.e. <i>'we found anything that involves videos of people performing music gets a lot of shares, likes, and comments; anything that involves kids especially'</i>);</li> <li>2) <b>Humorous</b> (i.e. <i>'anything funny, anything humorous generally works well'</i>); and</li> <li>3) <b>Nostalgic</b> (i.e. <i>'...anything that's nostalgic; so we used to do more of these, do a kind of throw-back Thursday thing like we took something from our archive...'</i>).</li> </ol> | <p>The target audience is mostly <b>music fans</b> (i.e. <i>'it's really about people who are gonna have a propensity to attend concerts'</i>).</p> <p>It is also suggested that <b>C8</b>, apart from being profit-driven, also retains a more <b>charitable pursuit</b> by targeting financially disadvantaged music lovers (i.e. <i>'we have a ticket scheme that provides complementary tickets to people who have financial challenges...either kids [that] are disadvantaged or people have mental health issues'</i>).</p> | <p>The most favourable organisational impression is <b>'engaging'</b> (i.e. <i>'we try to look for something that's going to have a degree of engagement or sharing'</i>).</p> <p>OIM is <b>not intentionally strategized</b> on social media (i.e. <i>'it's just another channel [i.e. social media] for us in our arsenal...there's little we need to do...'</i>).</p> <p>The practitioner retains a <b>strategic sense</b> and this has elicited the transformation of the firm's postings from being <b>'ad-hoc'</b> to being <b>'more planned'</b>.</p>               |

\*in some rare occasions, the interviewees' responses could be quite discursive and such response contained no spot-on elements for the analysis, even if they were asked a well-articulated question. The reason might be that the interviewees had varied apprehensions of the studied phenomenon. So, sometimes, the interviewees might just slightly touched upon what was inquired and went on making lengthy remarks about something marginally relevant. Although this, to a minimal extent, hindered the interpretation (the bulk of the discursive bits could not be used), their discursive responses were still appreciated as they were trying to maintain the flow of the conversations.

### **7.3 Organisational Qualities Affecting SMEs' OIM Practice on Social Media**

This section elaborates on the organisational qualities that have been identified to exert an impact on SMEs' OIM practice on social media. It is structured by firstly addressing how the organisational qualities were captured, categorised and theorised (i.e. an overview of how the themes were created). The following sections present the findings with empirical evidence, which features direct quotations extracted from the interview scripts.

#### **7.3.1 Overview**

In order for the readers to form a better understanding of the findings, this section elaborates on how the themes were captured, categorised, and theorised.

First of all, it becomes imperative to discuss how the interview guide (i.e. a list of interview questions; it was not all-encompassing as the interviews were kept semi-structured) was designed. Since SMEs and social media are the focal settings that underpin the current investigation (i.e. this is exactly what differentiates OIM with the specified settings from that in the context of large corporations), questions were crafted to explore these two settings (i.e. SMEs and social media). For instance, questions were created to inquire how the interviewees gauged the efficacy of their social media postings (i.e. one of the aspects in relation to daily operations of SMEs), and whether there was any built-in software of social media they found useful in managing social media postings (i.e. one of the aspects pertaining to the functionality of social media). Moreover, as social media practitioners are the ones that control the disclosure of information on social media (i.e. they decide whether a piece of information is publicised or not and in what way it should be publicised), some of the questions were also tailored to explore this aspect. For instance, the interviewees were asked the question if their personal habit affected the way they managed the social

media accounts on behalf of their firms. Finally, how the social media practitioners perceived the concept of OIM was also key to their way of managing social media postings. Therefore, questions such as ‘what impressions you want to make in the eyes of your target audience on social media’ (i.e. desirable organisational impressions) and ‘what have you done to assure that you are perceived that way’ (i.e. OIM practice to deliver the desirable impressions) were also added to the interview guide. It is also worth noting that the bulk of the questions were focused on the rationale behind the management of social media postings rather than OIM practice directly, since OIM practice is primarily reliant upon the management of social media postings (see *Section 29* for details). To sum up, the interview guide mainly incorporated the aforementioned four types of questions (not including questions triggered by the interviewees’ response during the interviews).

During the period of categorisation and pattern recognition (see *Chapter 4* for details), the researcher was searching for organisational qualities affecting the formulation and implementation of the OIM strategies identified in *Chapter 6*. Driven by the purpose, the researcher generated a number of initial codes and then classified them into several categories for each case (i.e. within-case themes). Subsequently, these initial codes and the corresponding categories were compared and reconciled across different cases (i.e. cross-case themes).

As a consequence, four categories were formulated in relation to the features of SMEs: 1) the personnel involved in the management of social media postings and how each member’s duty is defined; 2) the routinely actions taken by the responsible personnel to embark on the specified job on a regular basis; 3) the criteria/protocols/standards/doctrines, based on which the routinely actions are carried out (e.g. what content qualifies for publication on social media); and 4) the evaluative

mechanisms applied to gauge the efficacy of social media postings delivered by the routinely actions. It is noteworthy that these four categories are interrelated and they collectively represent the managerial dimension of SMEs (i.e. at an organisational level). Given the thematic meaning for each category, they were titled respectively as ‘division of roles and responsibilities’, ‘work routine’, ‘work principle’, and ‘evaluation system’.

Furthermore, another three categories were created pertaining to 1) the functionality of social media platforms; 2) the personal features of social media practitioners; and 3) the industrial context of sample firms. Evidently, the first category primarily reflects how the functionality of social media influences the aforementioned routinely actions. The second category principally portrays how the characteristics of social media practitioners affect their routinely actions. The last category mainly maps out how the features of the collective industry for each firm navigate some of the abovementioned routinely actions. It is also noteworthy that the second category is mainly associated with a ‘smaller’ context – individuals (i.e. at an individual level), whilst the last category with a ‘larger’ context – industry (i.e. also at an organisational level, but from a more holistic perspective). Provided the thematic meaning of each category, they were named respectively as ‘functionality of social media’, ‘nature of practitioner’, and ‘nature of industry’.

### **7.3.2 Nature of Practitioner**

The data suggests that nature of practitioner posed an impact on the represented firm’s OIM performance on social media. Here, ‘nature’ is an umbrella term that mainly embodies three facets: prior experience (i.e. experience gained from early life), occupational background (i.e. previous work experiences and specialised training



sessions attended), and personal habits (i.e. personal preferences in terms of socialising online).

A typical case is **C1**. First, the interviewee reflected that the way she managed her personal social media accounts was ‘*inter-linked*’ (**C1**) with the way she managed the firm accounts. Specifically, the content presented on the firm accounts, in some occasions, largely reflected the interviewee’s own personal opinions. For instance, she chose to promote the show on the firm accounts based on her own will (i.e. , ‘*I might go to see a show; for instance last week, I went to see a few shows for [name of an arts organisation] which is a festival going on at the moment in Liverpool*’ (**C1**)). The rationale that guided such a behaviour was that the interviewee attempted to promote the show, the artistic quality of which met her own personal standard, and expected the desired repayment of the favour (i.e. ‘*so if I post from [C1’s account], I know that I’m bumping up the profile [of this particular show] and hopefully one day they’ll do the same for me*’ (**C1**)). It is noteworthy that this type of collaboration had not been pre-negotiated and the show organiser might not repay the favour in return. Also, it was captured by the previous analysis that **C1** also retweeted a tweet generated on the interviewee’s personal Twitter account with the intention of ‘*bumping up the visibility of the particular tweet*’ (**C1**). This also added to the fact that the interviewee’s own character played an indispensable role in managing social media postings for her company. In a similar vein, the personality of the interviewee also steered the way **C1** was portrayed on social media. The interviewee deemed ‘*playfulness*’ (**C1**) as an essential trait which should be reflected from the firm’s social media postings and such a notion derived from her early career as an actress (i.e. when asked: ‘*have the experiences from your early life or early career (i.e. being an actress) influenced the way you post on social media?*’ (**C1**), the interviewee replied: ‘*I think*

*we all are sort of permeate, allowing our personalities to flow onto the company as well; I think I want to see a little bit playfulness as well... it doesn't have to be frivolous; you can be doing very serious issues, but you can still say like: 'good morning, it's a nice day' (C1)).* In addition, the lack of specialised training might also offer a reasonable account for this personality-laden style of social media management. Since the interviewee could not recall any training sessions she might have attended, it was most likely that the strategic elements exhibited from **C1**'s practice of OIM stemmed solely from the social media practitioner's personal preference.

Similarly, it was identified that other firms' social media postings were also not immune to personal influence. For instance, the interviewee of **C3** revealed that although she had previously participated in digital marketing courses, in which social media was an integral part, the social media postings she managed were *'purely based on the personal experience'* (**C3**). This indicates that the so-called training sessions did not help much to upgrade her relevant skillset. However, this by no means suggests that **C3**'s social media postings were deeply influenced by the personal preference of the interviewee. In fact, there was a clear boundary between the personal usage and the professional usage of social media. Specifically, the interviewee reflected on the style in relation to these two types of social media usage, claiming that there was a certain level of formality adhered to the way she managed her firm's accounts. This was largely due to the fact that while representing her firm on social media, she was constantly aware that she was interacting with people that did not necessarily have a personal relationship with her:

*'I think...a little bit formal in the company account...we try not to be stiff, but we do want to be a bit more professional. So, I'm a little bit...I swear less (laughter)...so, just like that, less swearing...yeah, I'm just a little bit*

*formal, a little bit less chatty, a little bit less familiar because I am not just talk...I think...I know who particularly I'm talking to in my personal account, and in my work account, I'm not...I'm not talking to people we necessarily have personal relationships with' (C3).*

It is also worth highlighting that the strategic sense embedded in her way of managing social media postings might be gained from the 'strategy swap' (C3) with social media practitioners working in other organisations in the same industry. Such 'strategy swap' took the form of meetings where all the networked social media practitioners exchanged their ideas of how to effectively engage with audiences on social media. For instance, this was when the interviewee of C3 gathered the strategic timing for social media postings (i.e. 'we share things like time of a day that is good to post' (C3)). Consequently, this 'strategy swap' upgraded the social media practitioner's skillset and injected a strategic sense into her management of social media postings.

In contrast with the above two cases, the interviewee of C7 acknowledged that she benefited immensely from 1) early career experience and 2) a strong personal interest in social media. Firstly, it was articulated that the interviewee had undergone a career path that allowed her to acquire extensive experience associated with managing social media postings. **Table 30** briefly documents her previous jobs and the associated job descriptions in a chronological order:

**Table 30: Career Path of C7's Social Media Practitioner**

| Job Title*                  | Job Description   | Evidence   |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Press & Marketing Assistant | Familiarisation with marketing and social media                               | 'I worked with the press and marketing manager there and she was the one who kind of guided me through marketing, digital marketing, social media...' (C7) |
| Marketing Assistant         | Collaboration with others on physical marketing, digital marketing, and press | 'we shared physical marketing, digital marketing, and doing the press with the press officer' (C7)   |
| Press & Marketing Officer   | Management of social media accounts   | 'I was more in charge of managing the social media and digital...' (C7)  |
| Digital Superuser           | Management of E-shop and data processing                                      | 'I was working not only on social media but a lot of E-shop, for example, data' (C7)   |

\*it is worth noting that all the previous jobs stated in the table were associated with the same employer: a company organising an annual literature festival.

More importantly, building upon the stated experience, the interviewee developed her own notion in relation to social media management. Most noticeably, she realised that each post must be ‘*engaging other people*’ (C7) rather than simply ‘*selling tickets and raising awareness*’ (C7). This notion is presumably one of the reasons why the firm sought to maintain a positive relationship with its key audience on social media (i.e. ‘relationship-oriented OIM strategies’, see **Section 6.4.1.3** for details regarding C7’s endeavours to greet its programme participants). Moreover, the notion of ‘*engaging other people*’ (C7) was also reinforced by the interviewee’s way of using her personal social media accounts. She implied that the stated notion is shared between both the management of the firm accounts and the personal accounts as follows:

*‘...that I look through personally, is connecting with friends, sharing with friends, and I feel like that’s what [C7] is doing: we are sharing, we are telling each other stories, people are welcome to interact, tell us what they think, I do think that mindset is influencing both: ‘let’s hear each other’s stories’ (C7).*

Further, the interviewee’s strong interest in social media was primarily manifested in her fondness of observing others on social media (i.e. ‘*But I can’t now imagine not having social media...and seeing how people react and seeing how different posts work, what makes people talk, really excites me*’ (C7)). Such a personal interest also served as a drive for the interviewee to monitor the updates of organisations analogous to hers through her own social media accounts (i.e. ‘*I follow a lot of theatre accounts...it’s interesting to see what works for them...*’ (C7)). Accordingly, such monitoring behaviours resulted in the formulation of another important notion that might exert an impact on the firm’s OIM enactment on social media. To be specific, the interviewee depicted what she had learnt from staying updated of other theatre accounts as the notion of ‘*personality as a brand*’ (C7). This notion of personality was defined as ‘*who they are as an organisation*’ (C7) and hence the perceived

‘personality’ (in the eyes of target audiences) denotes the organisational impression on which the present study is centred. As a consequence, the notion of ‘personality’ and the deeply associated notion of OIM had been mainly fostered during the interviewee’s earlier career. Also, in this case, such notions were perceived to fuel the firm’s OIM enactment as the interviewee articulated that they contributed to *‘igniting new ideas’* (C7).

C4 also exemplifies how the practitioner’s personal interest in social media impacts the firm’s social media management. The interviewee disclosed that *‘observing how other people use social media to communicate’* (C4) was where her interest lied (i.e. *‘I observe that on a daily basis’* (C4)). Since she had rarely benefited from any specialised training sessions (i.e. the interviewee answered: *‘no and I think that’s fairly common’* (C4) when asked *‘did you receive any formal or informal training before?’* (C4)), such a personal interest primarily motivated the self-learning through where her knowledge of running social media accounts was obtained (i.e. *‘knowing how to do social media is all about, is largely about intuition, experimentation, and hands-on approach’* (C4)). This self-learning approach was largely reliant upon the ‘trial and error’ process that is detailed in the section titled ‘evaluation system’.

Further, according to the data, the social media postings of C5 and C8 were principally influenced by the occupational background of their social media practitioners. First, the interviewee of C5 had formerly worked in a prestigious travel agency based in London (i.e. *I used to manage the social media accounts for [name of the travel agency]’* (C5)). Evidently, the target customers of this company were largely overseas and hence the volume of the social media postings normally peaked at unconventional time in order to increase the reach of the posted messages. This is where the interviewee first familiarised herself with the external software, Hootsuite, to pre-

schedule the postings (i.e. *'so I picked upon using Hootsuite around then' (C5)*). Moreover, she also attended a two-day training course that had a specific focus on professional usage of social media (i.e. *'I went to a two-day training course about 5 years ago around social media which focused on social media and how to run accounts, but it also had quite a focus on the analytics and getting the best out of that' (C5)*). This training course helped upgrade her skillset by teaching her how to strategize social media postings based on the analytics collected (i.e. *'I think the analytics around social media are really important, knowing what does work and doesn't work' (C5)*) (i.e. the significance of social media analytics was acknowledged and interpreted in the section named 'evaluation system'). In a similar vein, apart from gaining knowledge from the training session hosted by a professional (i.e. *'I think they are the biggest of any i-radio stations; the guy who runs their account, [name of the host], came up and gave us a day's kind of workshop, just sharing his knowledge, which is really, really useful' (C8)*), the interviewee had a strong music background and it was this particular background that helped bring out the appealing traits of **C8**'s social media postings (i.e. *'if you know nothing about classical music, I think it's quite hard to differentiate amongst all the stuff out there about what is funny, quirky, and unusual about, whatever it is, that would attract people on social media' (C8)*). The interviewee also offered an example to substantiate how her music background benefited the way she managed her company's social media postings:

*'For example, we had a percussionist a year or so ago, brought in this gigantic camera which was about this big, that he was using in molar six, I think it was, and a wooden box that he had made and it's been used in this piece, it's a very unusual thing, a very unusual instrument, and I saw it and thought: 'that would be great on social media because it is so odd-looking'; of course it was, I mean, even at that point when we didn't have many social media followers, it got a huge pickup, because percussion geeks out there all shared it. But, if you're not really into music, it's hard*

*for them to pick up on: 'that's an unusual thing', unless you know otherwise' (C8).*

Finally, the interviewee of **C2** exemplifies how the practitioner's occupational background and personal interest jointly exerted an impact on the OIM enactment on social media. Firstly, it was identified that the interviewee's occupational background was threefold: 1) social media manager for a large property company (i.e. *'...my husband and I both worked in a property company, we managed properties, and we had a lot more online presence' (C2))*; 2) youth worker (i.e. *'I was a youth worker' (C2))*; and 3) self-employed social media practitioner for small businesses (i.e. *'I...being self-employed, and helping companies, very small companies, I was a freelancer, they would hire me, social media became a large part of that' (C2))*. These three dimensions of the interviewee's occupational background all posed an influence on her way of managing social media postings on behalf of **C2**. Firstly, she learnt from the first dimension was that social media postings must be 'engaging' (i.e. *'so, how to galvanise people online, but not force it, not sell it' (C2))*, 'welcoming' (i.e. *'it was originally open to people...they can ask questions' (C2))*, and 'informative' (i.e. *'they don't have to pay for good information, correct information' (C2))*. Secondly, the second dimension helped her gain knowledge of what the youth was keen on (i.e. *'...my background in youth work, understanding the needs of youth at the time...' (C2))*, which was one indispensable component of **C2**'s target audience groups. Finally, the interviewee was made known that effective social media management must cater to the needs of the target audience (i.e. *'I realised that for social media to be impactful, especially in grassroots community, we need to understand the community as well' (C2))*. In essence, these three dimensions, as a collective, were believed to rationalise why **C2**'s social media postings were often strategized in order to maintain a positive relationship with the target audience (e.g. application of

‘flattery’, see *Section 6.4.1.1* for details). Further, in spite of her experience gained from undertaking community work, the interviewee also demonstrated a ‘*vast interest*’ (C2) to the local community in Rossendale (i.e. where C2 is located), since this very community was the place where she spent her childhood (i.e. ‘*I have an emotional attachment to the community because I grew up here*’ (C2)). This ‘emotional attachment’ again helped enhance her understanding of the community and hence helped devise a more community-oriented set of OIM strategies (i.e. this again explains why C2 often resorted to positivizing the relationship with the audience in the local community. Demonstrations are available in ‘flattery’ and ‘self-presentation’; see *Section 6.4.1.1* and *6.4.1.3* for details).

### **7.3.3 Division of Roles and Responsibilities**

The data indicates that division of roles and responsibilities is a prevalent theme that exert a strong influence on the practice and strategizing of OIM on social media. In this case, division of roles and responsibilities is primarily associated with social media management and hence is defined as the delimitation of roles and responsibilities for each staff member (i.e. what each individual should do and should not do) involved in managing social media postings.

The first example is C4, which had a contingent, programme-based division of roles and responsibilities of managing social media postings and such a division featured the optimisation of each individual’s speciality. The company had a social media practitioner (i.e. the interviewee) who had been working constantly on both the major programme (i.e. C4 holds an art festival every two years) and other smaller-scale artwork commissions. It is indicated that her role varied between the major programme and other secondary projects as during the festival she retained a more strategic role by planning weekly social media activities together with temporary



personnel (i.e. *‘my role there was more strategic, and helping to plan the weekly activity’* (C4)), whereas in an off-season period, she delivered all the public-facing materials on social media (i.e. *‘I also issue these messages out on all the different channels...as well as this, every day I’d monitor how existing content is doing and anything that’s been published, what’s the reaction...’* (C4)). Specifically, during the festival, the company hired extra staff to help materialise the strategic planning and the interviewee served as the leader of the team built around her:

*‘The way it works in 2016 for instance, I had a marketing and communication intern who was working with me full time for one year. I had a digital communication officer which was a part-time position based in the office. We also worked with a marketing consultant in a more strategic level. So, I am kind of the constant [staff member] in the team and the organisation for all the time’* (C4).

Having broken down the roles stated in the above quote, it becomes clear that on the one hand, the interviewee received support for both devising (i.e. *‘marketing consultant’*) and delivering strategies (i.e. *‘digital communication officer’* and *‘marketing and communication intern’*) because she was also committed to managing other forms of public-facing activities. In doing so, the quality of social media postings could be ensured by reducing the workload of the interviewee and letting her be the decision-maker (i.e. *‘I work with them to deliver this or to advise and make a decision on what’s the most appropriate way to communicate a certain message’* (C4)). On the other hand, during the off-season period, she also collaborated with the programme team to optimise the social media management for her company (i.e. *‘I work closely with the programme team who deliver all the programmes and projects, on deciding what content we should be promoting’* (C4)). This again facilitated the implementation of OIM since the day-to-day social media postings also incorporated the expertise of the in-field staff. Most intriguingly, driven by the same intent (i.e. capitalising on the expertise of the professionals), C4 also ‘outsourced’ the

management of social media postings to some artists within a short period, which the interviewee referred to as '*social experimentation*' (C4). In doing so, the responsibility lied with the particular artist who took over the social media account (i.e. Instagram). Such a shift of roles offered insights that could rarely been seen 'on the stage' and hence catered to the needs of the Instagram audiences (i.e. '*in the sense that we do this on Instagram where people follow us to encounter art and artists... they want behind-the-scene insights, we give them behind-the-scene insights, putting the platform in the hands of an artist*' (C4)). Also, to minimise the inconsistency that might emerge with the shift of roles, the interviewee took the responsibility of setting up quality standards and communicate them to the artists (e.g. '*we also speak to the artists and make sure they understand that they need to take images that are not blurry*' (C4)). Further, an announcement would also be publicised in the beginning by the interviewee to notify the audiences of the artists' role in managing social media postings so that the potential inconsistency would be acceptable (i.e. '*of course making sure that we let people know: this is an artist who is posting this instead of [C4] directly*' (C4)).

C5 also exemplifies how the roles and responsibilities in terms of managing social media postings were explicitly demarcated. The company had two staff members in place for undertaking digital marketing with the interviewee retaining a leading, strategic role (i.e. '*I look after the marketing and communications team*' (C5)) and the other person dedicated to implementing the pre-devised strategies (i.e. '*he kind of puts out the posts on social media*' (C5)). Although the interviewee also had an extended role of administrating sales (i.e. '*the sales part is external events, video production, and technology hires, throughout [C5]*' (C5)), she worked collaboratively with her colleague to proceed with a systematic work routine to operate social media activities

on a daily basis and this work routine, coupled with the well-defined roles between the two social media practitioners, safeguarded the consistency that flew along the timeline of **C5**'s social media postings (this will be elaborated in the following section: 'Work routine'). In addition, despite the fact that these two firm members retained a high level of autonomy in their work (i.e. the interviewee replied: '*just between me and [name of the other practitioner], we work together on it*' (**C5**) when asked '*do you work in pairs between you and the other person?*' (**C5**)), they also took advice from the programme team when promoting specific events:

*'We talk to the programme team, who programme the exhibitions and the events that sit under the programme, so we could be putting out particular things around our artists, which they do inform us on; or we could be putting out information about a public programme event maybe we need to push tickets on; so it's used in that kind of way'* (**C5**).

In this regard, the programme team also shared the responsibility of customising strategies for particular exhibitions and events and hence the expertise of the programme team could be capitalised on during the strategy-making process.

Moreover, the data indicates that **C7** upholds a relatively collaborative, democratic division of roles in terms of managing social media postings. First of all, the company has established a Communication Department constituted by three staff members to undertake all the public-facing activities. The role of each member is outlined as shown in **Table 31**:

**Table 31: Each Member's Duty in the Communication Department of C7**

| Staff Member                                   | Job Description   | Evidence   |
|--|---|--|
| Head of Marketing & Communication              | Overseeing overall strategies and line-managing the other two members | <i>'the head of communications and marketing oversees myself and the communication officer, so she looks at the strategy of our marketing, not just short-term, but also long term...'</i> ( <b>C7</b> ) |
| Communication Officer                          | Physical marketing  | <i>'...the communication officer works on something like, creating a programme, the physical programme for the productions...'</i> ( <b>C7</b> )   |
| Press & Digital Officer (i.e. the interviewee) | Digital marketing and press release                                   | <i>'I do all the press and digital marketing side of things...'</i> ( <b>C7</b> )  |

In this case, ‘collaborative’ is reflected from the integrated duty of each member in the department. To be specific, the head of marketing & communication was committed to formulating the long-term strategy from a holistic perspective (i.e. planning) and the long-term strategy provided guidelines for what should be publicized on social media. Also, the communication officer, who was responsible for creating physical programme for the firm’s productions (e.g. direct mail), supplied the content for social media postings. Therefore, the social media practitioner, instead of undertaking social media management alone, was in collaboration with the other two members. In addition, the social media practitioner also gained support from outside the department in terms of creating the content for social media postings. As the interviewee reflected, in some occasions, the artistic assistant director, the stage management team, and the cast were willing to take photos and videos, which were an indispensable component of C7’s social media activities (i.e. *‘the artistic assistant, when he is around, has chance to do that’ & ‘sometimes the stage management is able to do it as well as the cast’ (C7)*). It is clearly indicated that the support from outside the department had significant contribution to the promotion of the firm’s theatrical productions (i.e. *‘that’s why [name of the play] was so successful, because we had an assistant director’ (C7)*). More importantly, it is also evident that the staff, who were working directly on one production, had a better knowledge of what content best conveys desired impressions for the particular production. Evidence is shown below:

*‘...the cast of [name of the production] ...they took a video...I think it was on Manchester Oxford Road train station and there was a piano there, and [name of the production] was a musical, not a musical, it was a festival show with music. So, they were playing the piano at the train station, and they greeted another cast member who was getting off the train, and one of the cast members recorded it and sent it to me, so that I could use it’ (C7).*

According to the above quote, the content of the video could be thematised to project the organisational impression of ‘attractiveness’ (i.e. music playing in the public) and ‘professionalism’ (i.e. ‘piano playing’ echoes with the artistic quality of the ‘music show’).

Moreover, ‘democratic’ is genetically demonstrated by the interviewee’s remark: *‘we call ourselves an ensemble, we are not doing something that other people would be uncomfortable with’ (C7)*. To substantialise what it is meant by ‘ensemble’, the interviewee revealed how they always held discussions to make the final decision on what should be put out on social media:

*‘...in terms of videos or photos, we’ll sit down as a team, and we’ll say that these are kind of the ones we want to use on flyers, these are the ones for online, but a lot of the time, there’s a lot of crossovers’ (C7)*.

Additionally, the social media practitioner also valued the opinion of staff with rich infield experience. For instance, the artistic director exerted a strong influence over promotions on social media:

*‘if the director says: ‘actually I don’t think that suits this production’, it’s not a ‘No’ as in ‘no, we’re never gonna do that’, it’s a ‘No’ as in ‘no, I don’t think it actually fits with what I’m doing as a director’, so that means, we can use it, but actually, if it doesn’t fit with the production, why would we use it? But it might be looked at for a different production’ (C7)*.

The implication of the above quote is that although the director was not empowered to finalise the decision, their opinion was respected. Hence, the whole decision-making process was democratic to some degree. This also indicates that **C7**’s OIM enactment, since it is holistically conveyed through the management of its social media postings, is influenced by the collaborative, democratic division of duties.

In contrast, **C1** is a typical example that has undergone an ambiguous demarcation of personnel duties. First of all, the responsibility for running day-to-day social media accounts lied with the creative director (i.e. the interviewee). However, managing

social media postings only accounted for a small portion of the interviewee's duty as she was also assigned to direct self-produced shows for the company due to her expertise on theatrical performance (i.e. she was an actress in her early career). Coupled with the fact that she only worked for four days a week (i.e. It was not a full-time job), managing social media postings was not considered as a priority in the company (i.e. *'sometimes I don't have time to go on social media'* (C1)). Second, since social media remained a marginal segment of the interviewee's duty, it was unsurprising to comprehend that all three people currently working in the company had access to the social media accounts and they were able to post, without notifying the others, what they reckoned was suitable for being publicised on social media (i.e. *'we all have the loggings, so we can all do [social media management]'* (C1)). However, the shared duty sometimes caused discrepancies among the three members as one might disapprove of the posts created by another, whilst no one upheld full authority to finalise the decision:

*'But I think they all know that mostly I'm doing it, if it's advertising, or if it's working towards something [with a clear goal]; and [it's] discretionary [that] some of us may say 'I'm gonna post this or I'm gonna post others'; for example, like I said, if you go out and do something that might be related to the company or just related to the arts in general, someone, one of the three might say: 'I've been doing this, I've seen the show and [I'll post about it]'; so, recently, one of my colleagues posted publicity for one of our emerging artists and said: 'he's doing the show', to which I was like...[the interviewee's facial gesture suggested that she did not appreciate the publicity of the show]'* (C1).

Such ambiguously defined roles and responsibilities, as evidently stated in the above quote, might elicit an inconsistency in the enactment of OIM. Also, lack of communications among the members amplified such an inconsistency as the interviewee claimed that they did not spare time for strategically mapping out the social media postings (i.e. *'I don't think we have much time for that'* (C1)). Further, when undertaking a relatively larger-scale project, C1 usually sought assistance from

outside the company as the resort to the short-staffed situation to maintain its social media presence (i.e. *‘we had volunteers in the past doing lots of social media [activities] for a festival exclusively, so sometimes we job [out social media management] to volunteers for a specific project to do the social media [activities]’* (C1)). Thus, in these situations, the responsibility was aligned to the people who might not have any experience in running organisational social media accounts and this inevitably aggravated the aforementioned inconsistency due to the volunteers’ lack of proper language skills (i.e. *‘sometimes you might have volunteers who don’t know how to spell very well’* (C1)). As a consequence, the ambiguously delimited duties ultimately led to a lack of strategic sense among the social media practitioners as the interviewee was unaware of the OIM strategy embedded in C1’s social media postings (i.e. the interviewee replied: *‘we don’t have strategies as you might have gathered’* (C1), when asked *‘how do you work out the strategies for making positive impressions?’* (C1)).

#### **7.3.4 Work Routine**

The second facet is associated with a firm’s daily work routine. In general, sample firms adopt a customary course of procedures to manage their social media postings and this has an impact on the OIM performance. The work routine is varied across different companies and hence its impact on the OIM performance is also multifaceted, depending on how the work routine is laid out by each company.

A notable example is C6. Overall, a set of regular instructions were followed to plan, coordinate, generate, and implement social media posts on a day-to-day basis. In this case, planning took precedence as the major building block of C6’s daily work routine. The interviewee reflected on the preliminary stage of managing social media postings as follows:

*‘Starting at the beginning, we have a social media planner which is just an excel spreadsheet but it’s day by day. In that planner, we try to put as many of the messages in as possible in advance so that...we aim to work about a week or two ahead so that we’ll know what messages we put in on social media for the next week or two. So, that’s the first stage just populating that planner and that just helps us to check that we are representing different parts of the organisation because in [C6] we have exhibitions, we have a restaurant and then there’s always a lot going on and it helps us to make sure we don’t miss anything’ (C6).*

Here, an excel spreadsheet was used to comprehensively gather the messages that were intended to be publicised on social media in advance. As articulated in the quote above, the content of the messages was determined at this stage and such content was ensured to fully reflect each component of the company (i.e. ‘exhibitions’, ‘restaurant’ and other built-in facilities). The rationale behind such a planning stage was to secure the representativeness of the pre-determined social media postings (i.e. ‘to make sure we don’t miss anything’) since the building, with four galleries, houses a wide range of activities ‘across visual art, music, dance, live art and literature’ (C6). The next stage was to pre-schedule all the posts, using an external software:

*‘The next stage is we use a social media planning tool called Hootsuite, and that just allows us to schedule things in advance and so we’ll drop the messages, put them in Hootsuite, we schedule them to go out and that’s a big part to it’ (C6).*

This scheduling stage, where all the social media posts were programmed to go public in a timely manner, was incorporated to liberate the social media practitioner from being subject to the pre-set agenda (i.e. the practitioner does not have to await the right timing to release posts). The scheduling also facilitated the timing-centric tactic that could not be uncovered or accurately rationalised in the previous analyses. To maximise the reach of social media postings, the practitioner devised a set of time slots to put out posts:

*‘We tend to stick, it does vary, but we tend to stick to an early morning time like 10 am and then we’ll do 12, 1, 2 and then perhaps 4 or 6 pm depending on how much content we have’ (C6).*



The interviewee continued to illuminate the reasoning behind such a tactical move as follows:

*‘The 10 am is designed for that early morning slot when people are just sitting down at work really; and then 12, 1, 2, the lunch time slot, when people are on their break and checking their things, that kind of thing; 4 o’clock because we feel that’s a rise around that time as well as people are getting towards the end of a day: a lot of people’s attention at work collapses at around 4 o’clock and they start to look at their social media again and then we might do an evening post’ (C6).*

As a result, it is the scheduling, functionalised by the external software, namely, ‘Hootsuite’ that materialised this tactic and therefore made considerably more time-efficient the management of social media postings. Further, it also saved time for the slightly more contingent part of the work routine.

*‘On a daily basis, we are involved in the more live side of it – the interaction, so, retweeting people, responding to messages, answering queries and although we do try to plan a lot in advance, obviously there’ll be some things that just come up on a day-to-day basis’ (C6).*

Evidently, the interaction mentioned in the quote could not be pre-scheduled and hence allowed for a certain degree of flexibility and dynamism. Consequently, the planning, scheduling and interaction jointly forged a rather systematic, dynamic, and coherent work routine by which OIM strategies and any other corresponding social media strategies (e.g. timing-centric tactic), were efficiently devised and implemented.

In a similar vein, **C5** also had a team built up to constantly produce social media postings and interact with audiences on social media. Specifically, **C5**’s team, consisting of two staff members (i.e. one worked as a consultant who took the responsibility of determining the content of social media postings, whereas the other served to put out those pre-determined messages), was also heavily involved with the planning and scheduling as the commencement of the weekly work routine:

*‘So, we schedule quite a few things, and that’s done in an in-depth basis weekly, but kind of monthly exhibition-wise, because we kind of have key*

*dates that we know that we're going to put out a specific social media message. So, for example, earlier this week, it was world's heritage day, Tuesday the 18th, and we've got a couple of pieces within our exhibition around heritage, so we knew months ago we wanted to put out quite a bit about world's heritage day on Tuesday, it's just kind of picking those dates as well' (C5).*

It was well articulated and exemplified in the first quote that such a work routine contributed to matching up the company's specific activities to the dates they were associated with. Apart from ensuring that social media postings represented each integral component of the company (i.e. reflected in C6), this also echoed C5's intent that social media postings ought to represent 'the relevance that fits in with other things' (C5) (e.g. World's Heritage Day). Further, the rationale of mapping out the whole work routine at the beginning also went beyond simply securing the representativeness of social media postings, as it was also associated with maintaining consistency in strategizing OIM on social media (i.e. 'So, [we are] trying to map out so that we've got some sort of consistency flow across our social media'(C5)). It is worth highlighting that the interactive side of the work routine also entailed some level of consistency. Specifically, before issuing out the messages of a substantive project that they thought might be controversial, the management team usually estimated potential reactions from audiences and tailored a unified response to each type of the reactions. The work routine of constructing standard responses to potential negative reactions was initiated by preparing a 'fact sheet' (C5) on which the messages that might cause controversy were listed, paralleled by the potential reactions and the corresponding responses. Thus, this fact sheet worked as the guidelines in interacting with negative commentaries. It is also noteworthy that although not responding to extremely harsh, aggressive comments was found to be a means to avoid confrontation with audiences (i.e. strategy titled 'Opinion Conformity' in the previous chapter), C5 also managed to produce carefully crafted responses to those lightly-toned critics prior

to the release of the potentially disputable posts because *‘it helps us make sure we are consistently replying to people that may have negative thoughts about our project in a way that is quite thought through’* (C5). Besides, if there emerged something that they had not estimated in advance, they would have a discussion on what their response should be. To earn time for making proper responses, they would immediately offer a neutrally and politely toned reply such as *‘thanks for getting in touch with us, we will get back to you as soon as possible’* (C5). This was also intended to reassure the audiences that their opinions were valued and so the feedback loop would not be terminated (i.e. *‘Just to make sure the dialog is going and work out what we are going to say’* (C5)). Hence, such a work routine supplemented the OIM strategy identified in the previous analysis and they collectively contributed to fending off the potential escalation of image-threatening disputes.

Unlike the abovementioned two cases, C3 employed a slightly more contingent work routine. As discussed in the prior section (i.e. ‘Division of Roles and Responsibilities’), there was only one staff member responsible for running social media accounts on behalf of C3 due to the firm’s limited capacity and manpower. Also, since social media accounted for a tiny bit of the interviewee’s daily duty (i.e. *‘It’s quite a small part of what I do’* (C3)), the work routine primarily relied upon the individual habits of the social media practitioner. For instance, the interviewee revealed that she always checked social media postings off-work as she often received notifications from her phone (i.e. *‘I have Twitter on my phone, so I kind of do that all the time anyway for the company’* (C3)). Moreover, from a strategic perspective, the planning part of the work routine was not thoroughly devised as the content of social media postings was exclusively determined by the social media practitioner. Anything that the social media practitioner thought was relevant would be posted immediately

on social media (i.e. *‘I check out to see if there’s any news stories, or anything happening globally that is relevant to any of our programmes at the moment’ (C3)*)).

The final example is **C1**, which adopted a contingent, non-systematic work routine to manage its social media postings. Since managing social media accounts was seen as a marginalised errand (i.e. *‘In terms of social media, as I said, that’s not my main job, actually it’s no one’s main job here’ (C1)*), **C1**’s work routine was basically the practitioner browsing social media in leisure time in search for the content for postings:

*‘On a daily basis, very simply I would have Facebook and Twitter on my computer, and then every now and then, maybe lunch time, the moments I am like in between tasks...I’ll have a look at what’s going on. If there’s something that I think would be interesting to interact with, or just post something, if we are doing any programme’ (C1)*

Evidently, such a work routine was primarily dependent upon the personal preference of the social media practitioner in terms of the content and timing of the social media postings and hence occasionally frivolous, non-strategic content would be publicised on social media (i.e. *‘I posted that I was locked [outside] here once’ (C1)*)).

### **7.3.5 Work Principle**

It has been identified that sample firms uphold a series of work principles that lay the foundation of their social media management and these principles pose an impact on the strategizing and practice of the firms’ OIM enactment.

First, **C4** best exemplifies how work principles exert influence on the content of its social media postings. The first and foremost principle content-wise was to *‘bear some relation to what [C4] does’ (C4)*. To be specific, the content publicised on the firm’s social media accounts must be firmly associated with its speciality, namely, contemporary art (i.e. *‘it has to be about art, contemporary art, because that’s what*

*we do as an organisation'* (C4)). Aside from the projects and programmes the firm initiated that were undoubtedly art-centric, the content, in certain occasions, also contained elements of the wider organisational context, namely, industry. For instance, the firm would post about the Turner Prize, which was regarded as *'the most prestigious award in contemporary art'* (C4). It is imperative to note that this was not only simply intended to emphasise what the firm specialised in, but also was seen as a way to proclaim the firm's authority in the industry:

*'we could congratulate someone on their appointment, if it's a significant appointment in the arts world, because we want to be seen as an authority, as a voice in contemporary art, and on a more local scale, on Facebook, for instance, we have a large base of followers, people from Liverpool, so, if there's something significant happening on the Liverpool arts scene, be it an exhibition, an opening, or an article, that highlights something interesting about Liverpool's culture, we would share this content because we think it's relevant to our audiences'* (C4).

In addition, C4 also preserved a certain tone of voice pertaining to the narrative of social media postings. Such a tone of voice must be balanced between being *'overly formal or detached'* (C4) and being *'jokey or chatty'* (C4). In this case scenario, the former is often seen as the manifestation of professionalism whereby the latter is normally perceived to symbolise the nature of business. Therefore, this offers a reasonable expository of the firm's usage of emoji on social media. Specifically, emoji was employed to *'just appear a bit playful and friendly rather than static and institutional'* (C4). Nonetheless, in order to still retain a certain level of professionalism, emoji was applied *'in good measure'* (C4) rather than excessively that would presumably lead to the situation of being *'out of character'* (C4).

C6 is another example in which relevance was identified as the key theme that guided their daily work routine. First, the interviewee revealed that the frequency of postings had been the major concern when she initially took the job as the principle at that time

was to avoid generating an excessive volume of messages. However, such a principle had been overturned by upholding a specific focus on relevance (i.e. *‘there was an idea that you don’t want to bombard your audience with too many messages... we aim to post things that we think are really relevant to our audience’ (C6)*). One generic demonstration of relevance is *‘reviews in newspapers’ (C6)*. The firm posted reviews of its film productions, guided by the rationale that *‘that’s really useful as an endorsement that someone else saying to come here rather than just us all the time’ (C6)*. This implies that the formulation of ‘external acknowledgement’ as one of the core OIM strategies identified in the previous chapter might have been triggered by such a principle. To illustrate the point, the interviewee also offered an example of how the bond between some of the firm’s projects and a cultural scene in the city:

*‘So, a good example: not long ago, we had Chinese New Year, so we had a family activity here which was the scene around that as well as talking about what we were doing here; we also link up to the things that are happening around the city... it just makes Bluecoat feel like a part of Liverpool as well’ (C6).*

Thus, such a demonstration of relevance, intertwined with ‘location’ which was found to be one of the organisational contexts of ‘external acknowledgement’ (see **Section 6.3.2** for details), was intended to stimulate the resonance for the local audiences.

**C7** best exemplified how an alternative principle was widely implemented in selecting the proper content to be publicised on social media. In simplistic terms, this principle could be thematised as ‘engaging’ (i.e. *‘we want to engage our people’ (C7)*). In this case, such a principle could be interpreted in different terms when referring to different types of content, such as ‘inclusive’ (i.e. *‘we are very inclusive’ (C7)*), ‘welcoming’ (i.e. *‘we want people to feel welcome’ (C7)*), and ‘informative’ (i.e. *‘if it’s a blog, I’ll say, you know, to be informative’ (C7)*). Evidently, these terms all bear the same conception of engaging the target audience and conform to the notion of OIM (i.e.

‘informative’ could be understood as a means of projecting ‘professionalism’, whereas ‘welcoming’ and ‘inclusive’ are associated with ‘attractiveness’). For instance, to substantiate what it was meant by ‘engaging’ in practice, the interviewee elaborated that *‘obviously a blog should be well written and accessible, [whereas] a quiz needs to be fun’ (C7)*. In order to retain the principle, especially when occasionally the social media management was ‘outsourced’ to partnering artists (i.e. social media accounts were run by artists to *‘show how theatre works from different angles’ (C7)* for a certain period of time), the practitioner would firstly make sure that the relevant artists were fully informed of the principle (i.e. *‘if we do hand over the Facebook account to someone, they basically match what we were doing, we want them to have their own personality, but make sure that it’s actually in line with [C7]’ (C7)*) and secondly assess the updates before the content was publicised (i.e. *‘they tend to come all through me’ (C7)*).

In a similar vein, driven by the firm’s constant quest for *‘constantly engaging people’ (C2)*, C2’s work principle entailed an element of friendliness for family. According to the interviewee, the way C2 tried to materialise its commitment to the local community was basically carrying out family-oriented activities (i.e. *‘we have this concept which is about family’ (C2)*). Driven by the family-friendly concept (i.e. this concept was not formalised until the interviewee took in charge of C2’s social media postings), C2’s venue (i.e. a puppet-making theatre) had transitioned from a place *‘people can come in and host their events’ (C2)* to *‘becoming a community hub’ (C2)*. This transition was evidently reflected from the way C2 managed its social media postings. As the interviewee articulated, the firm’s social media postings were often constructed in a way that the major theme of an event was explicitly communicated to

the audience. This was to secure that the firm's young clientele was also accommodated. Evidence is provided as follows:

*'It has to be family-oriented, so, for example, we are quite conscious that if there are young members of the family that have access to social media, or they may be using their parents' social media and just browse [the content] and see [C2], what they come across is relevant to them, but also correct for them...' (C2).*

The most notable way to cater to the needs of the young clientele stated above is to 'have a little description' (C2) to articulate the topic of each event. This also prevented the promotion for each event from being overly ad-hoc and hence echoed with the discussed principle of being family-oriented. Overall, such a principle could also be regarded as a manifestation of 'social responsibility' (i.e. one of the organisational impressions identified in **Chapter 5**).

### **7.3.6 Evaluation System**

The data implies that each inquired SME retained an evaluation system of varied forms to gauge the effectiveness of its social media management. This evaluation system was found to profoundly contribute to the strategic planning and deployment of each firm's social media postings and corresponding OIM performance. Here, evaluation system denotes any course of action that is intended to refine sample firms' digital policies by gauging the effectiveness of their engagement with target audiences on social media.

**C6** makes a good example. The firm's social media postings and any embedded tactical elements (e.g. OIM strategies) primarily relied upon gauging its target audiences. First, it becomes evident that **C6**'s postings on different social media platforms were differentiated to cater to the demographic displayed on each platform. For instance, in a broad sense, Facebook was mostly directed at the general public, who were not necessarily in constant pursuit of arts (i.e. 'When we draft our social



*media strategy [on Facebook], I'm really thinking about a general audience; so, probably people who visit Liverpool; culturally engaged, but not necessarily art experts; and that's who I'm gearing towards really' (C6)).* With the purpose of appealing to this type of audiences, the content on Facebook was phrased in approachable terms so that the general public would apprehend (i.e. *'I'm trying to make sure that the posts don't have any art terminology or specialist language, make sure it's really accessible; and yeah trying to make it as approachable as possible for the general visitors coming through the door' (C6)).* Meanwhile, Twitter, despite a certain level of overlapping in the middle, was more inclined towards art fans, who were mainly constituted by younger population and hence the information publicised on Twitter was more arts-specific (i.e. *'Twitter allows us to do more of the messages that perhaps are for our art specialist audience like residencies and specific news about artists and that's probably more of an interest to them' (C6)).*

Also, the firm made endeavours to more accurately define and categorise its target audiences. Specifically, technically supported by an intelligence company, **C6** managed to conduct a sophisticated survey and formulated 10 segments of its audiences, with each one profiling a certain assemblage of like-minded people (i.e. *'We work with them with our research in the building and they help profile the people that are coming in; I think it's about ten different segments' (C6)).* These segments were devised in accordance with multiple variables such as frequency of visits, location of residence, age, income, and interest. Most importantly, the segmentation also incorporated the audiences' behavioural patterns captured on social media (i.e. *'social media is in that as well, in terms of how they use it' (C6)).* For instance, a category labelled as *'dormitory dependables' (C6)* features mid-aged, suburban middle class whose common social media usage is *'to research the place they are*

*about to visit'* (C6). As a result, the audience segmentation, which was outlined in exhaustive detail, sparked the strategic planning in a way that the content of the firm's social media postings was customised in an attempt to optimise the engagement with all segments simultaneously (i.e. *'our plan looks the year and looks: 'OK, which events or exhibitions are gonna be interest of that segment, which will be the interest of another and what are the best ways to reach those people altogether''* (C6)).

C5 is another example that managed to segment its audiences. In this case, the firm had 6 categories and they had divided interests (i.e. *'we break down our audiences into six different sections'* (C5)). The categorisation in this case was tailored to address C5's industrial context (i.e. a company that presents technology-based arts). For instance, one of them was titled *'a tinker or a hacker'* (C5) and it was used to describe technology enthusiasts who demonstrated no interest beyond high-tech artefacts (i.e. *'someone that we'd call 'a tinker or a hacker': so, someone is really into the technology, and kind of like the tech-workshops that we do here, but wouldn't necessarily be a 'sitting at the café and having a cup of coffee' kind of person'* (C5)). Similar to C6, C5 devised a strategic plan to secure that all 6 categories were covered on a weekly basis so that not a single category was underwhelmed (i.e. *if we're looking at our weekly plan, and we don't have a Facebook plan that's relevant to category 4, that would be like: 'we need to find something that's relevant to them to put out'. So, it's making sure that throughout the whole week, there's something relevant to each of the six categories'* (C5)).

Further, social media analytics (e.g. weekly Facebook analytics reports the firm was signed up for) were extensively used to gauge the effectiveness of social media postings and hence nurture an understanding of the sentiment of its target audiences. In this case, the analytics helped identify 1) the audience demographic on each

platform (i.e. *‘the people under the age of 25 engage with us much more on Facebook than they do on Twitter; Twitter, we tend to engage kind of older audiences’ (C5)*); and 2) the most engaging content on social media (i.e. *‘if you’ve got a good image and a nice sentence that goes with it, it works really well on Instagram’ (C5)*). According to the results of the analytics, the firm, in general, managed to convert the style of its social media postings from a rather scattered, discursive pattern to a more purposeful, orderly one (i.e. *‘our posts were quite sporadic whereas now we are posting kind of everyday and it’s got much more focus on the exhibitions or things that are going on the building rather than kind of random [C5]-related things’ (C5)*). The end result of this statistically supported evaluation system also embodied embedding a large number of news links on Twitter in order to accommodate the elderly demographic on Twitter (i.e. *‘[the age group on Twitter is higher], which is why we put out a lot of our news links on that so that it’s more serious than our Instagram or Facebook’ (C5)*) and populating Instagram with plenty of behind-the-scene images as they occupied the bulk of the traffic (i.e. *‘when I’m going through an installing phase, no one is actually allowed in the gallery because we are setting it up; images that artworks are being installed but not yet available publically are liked quite a bit’ (C5)*).

It is noteworthy that **C5** also gained insights by following its peers’ regular updates. Although this type of evaluation system was not formatted in a professional, sophisticated way compared with social media analytics, it was also an integral part of the feedback loop. For instance, **C5** had a specific focus on the tone of voice, through which its peers communicated with key audiences and detected a tonal inconsistency between a firm’s face-to-face interactions and social media dialogs:

*‘It’s just been around different ways of communicating and also looking at different people’s tones; I’ve found it really interesting, this particular arts organisation that we come across is quite stuffy at times, but their*

*social media is quite jovial and friendly; it's really wired to see that mix'*  
(C5).

In addition, C4 is an example in which the analytics could also be used to keep track of the trend that pervades social media for a certain period. This trend signifies the emergence of new technologies and the corresponding user behavioural patterns. For example, live streaming was one cutting-edge social media functionality that had been extensively implemented by many. Thus, the interviewee observed this trend and started experimenting with it on the firm's accounts. Such a trend-assessing process echoed with the interviewee's reflection on the nature of her social media management (i.e. '*intuition, experimentation, and hands-on approach*' (C4)). Here, intuition refers to the person's instinct or alertness to the tendency on social media, whereas experimentation and hands-on approach denote the practical, 'trial and error' process to obtain insights and adapt accordingly. The evidence is presented below:

In response to the question, '*how do you monitor the change or the trend around social media?*' (C4), the interviewee answered:

*'half of it is how people respond to the content we post, so if you notice a trend in time, some of the images we posted haven't got as much engagement as we would set out to achieve, so we would adjust our strategy in response to this; and then of course it's just making sure when I spend time on social media, I pay attention to, like: 'oh, people have started using live streaming more', therefore, I'm going to trial this from [C4] to see how it fits, or first I would think: 'does it fit what we do? Is it a new way to tell the story of [C4]?' (C4).*

Further, C7 also demonstrates how the 'trial and error' approach stated above works in capitalising on the insights gained from previous experimentations. In this case, social media analytics (e.g. 'BITLY': a website that could track and analyse the links through different social media platforms) were employed to gauge the performance of an unprecedented promotion. Building upon the extensive publicity (i.e. audience engagement) reflected from social media analytics, the interviewee decided to repeat

the promotion with a different focal theme in the following year. Consequently, the promotion was deemed successful again with an increased publicity (i.e. enhanced audience engagement). Evidence is provided as follows:

*‘...our Pleasure Beach last year...we changed our auditorium into a beach, and it was amazing, but it was the first time we had done anything like that...so, obviously we did the social media campaign, we reached a huge amount of people on social media for those four days...but this year, we’re doing something similar, it’s gonna be railway station rather than beach...so, this year I based what we were doing on what we found last year, so, the engagement actually did go up...’ (C7).*

### **7.3.7 Nature of Industry**

The data suggests that nature of industry had an impact on SMEs’ OIM enactment on social media by fostering collaboration and partnership among the affiliated organisations. **C6** is a good example in which the features of its industry are addressed. It was implied by the interviewee that the industrial context had minimised the level of competition within the industry because the major activities initiated by these affiliated companies were exhibitions that would normally last for a relatively long period and hence the audiences were unlikely to choose one over another (i.e. *‘because most exhibitions run for a period of months, there’s no reason why a person won’t come to [company A]’s exhibition and our exhibition and [company B]’s exhibition...they can come to all of them’ (C6)*). The interviewee also demonstrated the cross-industry discrepancy to back her point (i.e. *‘we don’t feel that we are kind of competing for people in the way that perhaps Sony and Samsung are competing for TV sales: you’re only gonna buy one TV, but you can come to more than one arts exhibitions’ (C6)*). However, under certain circumstances, their organisational offerings might overlap. If so, as indicated by the interviewee, those companies would endeavour to eschew delivering identical content to their audiences concurrently (i.e. *‘sometimes if a partner posts that they have an event coming up, we might think we*

*might not put anything similar on the same day' (C6)).* If the situation could not be avoided, they would preferably seek to co-host the event through negotiation rather than risk splitting the audiences (i.e. *'say, you'll have two photography events, it doesn't make sense if you have them both on the same night because you're just going to split your audience, and it's not good for either of us, so we try to avoid it' (C6)).* As a consequence, this offers a reasonable account of C6's promotion of its partners' activities (this type of reciprocal promotion is heavily involved with the OIM strategy named 'external acknowledgement') on social media especially on Twitter where the interplay between the firm and its partners tended to be more intensified.

Further, the industrial nature of C6 also sheds light on its OIM performance on social media. For instance, apart from being the centre for contemporary arts, the firm also self-identifies as a heritage attraction, provided that it is based in the most historic building in the city. Thus, coupled with the aim of driving more tourists to visit the building, they made efforts to project such a self-depiction by sharing a news that the city's cultural heritage significance was recognised and awarded:

*'Although visual arts are at the heart of [C6], we are also a heritage attraction, the oldest building in city centre, so if there's something interesting about that, then we would post that to Facebook as well; something about, like, recently, Liverpool was awarded, I can't remember the title, I think it's a heritage icon or heritage ambassador, something like that, it's quite a prestigious title; and we shared that on social media and it was actually really popular' (C6).*

The disclosure of such content was also thematised as one of the organisational contexts (i.e. 'location') of the OIM strategy named 'external acknowledgement'.

C4 also exemplifies how the characteristics of its business has influenced the formulation of its OIM strategies on social media. First, C4's major programme was to host a biennial festival that took place across the city with a considerable number of artworks and artists involved. Given the large scale of the festival, C4 was unable

to deliver it solely, meaning that the company had to seek collaboration with its peers within the area affected (i.e. Liverpool). In this regard, partnership was nurtured. To optimise the promotion of the festival, such collaboration and partnership inevitably extended to social media:

*‘So, with the main force behind [C4]’s festival, we deliver a lot of these exhibitions with our partners within the city, we work with them to curate exhibitions, to work with artists, and to present shows in [partner A], [partner B], and [partner C]. Other arts organisations in Liverpool puts programmes and projects concurrently with [C4], so we all work really closely together on the overall marketing and communication strategy, because we all want to bring people here to experience the art and this extends to social media, where we tend to promote each other’s messages, and we help each other out. It also gives out a message about you’re not acting in isolation, you are part of an arts ecology within the city, this should be communicated online as well and that’s what we do by sharing our partners’ news that we think would be relevant to our audiences and they would do the same for us’ (C4).*

The quote above clarifies the motivation of the OIM-laden, collaborative behaviours (i.e. ‘external acknowledgement’) that were observed and captured by the analysis of social media postings (i.e. ‘*we tend to promote each other’s messages, and we help each other out*’ (C4)). It is also worth highlighting that the ‘*arts ecology*’ mentioned in the quote particularly teases out the underlying rationale of ‘affiliation’ as one of the contextual variations of ‘external acknowledgement’ (see **Section 6.3.2** for details). In addition, with the purpose of fostering collaboration and avoiding direct competition, it was implied by the interviewee that the arts organisations within the city would endeavour to differentiate their own programmes/projects/events from others’. This certainly affected the way they substantialised their OIM strategies on social media. In this case, C4 would usually demonstrate how ‘*they are engaging people online*’ and ‘*what activities they are delivering*’ (C4), by monitoring its partners’ regular social media updates. In doing so, they strived to ‘*deliver things in different ways*’ (C4), even with a shared goal. It could be reasonable to infer that with

the aim of distinguishing itself from others, **C4** might be highly committed to emphasizing its qualifications and this echoed with the findings of the previous analysis (i.e. the OIM strategy named ‘publicizing organisational qualifications’).

The same applies to **C5**, **C3**, and **C8**. First, the industrial nature of **C5** sparked its pursuit for creativity (i.e. one of the organisational impressions identified in the analysis of firm manifestos). Specifically, technology was deemed as the company’s core value. To tease out this creativity-laden value, **C5** experimented with a 360 degree video, which allowed the audiences to explore the whole scene incorporated in the video (i.e. by dragging around the mouse) from all angles possible (i.e. ‘*you can drag around; it’s literally ten-minute artist interview where the artist stood in the middle of the room, being interviewed, but you can scroll around the artwork while you...*’ (**C5**)). Second, **C3**’s nature of being ‘*theatre for social change*’ (**C3**) also triggered its interaction with many politicians on Twitter as these politicians might fuel the firm’s focus on marginalised social groups (i.e. ‘*we link up with lots of councillors on Twitter coz lots of councillors, our local MPs, MEPs, we have engaged with, we link up with them on Twitter....so, we try and get them interested in our activities...*’ (**C3**)). Hence, the linkage between **C3** and those political figures was believed to reinforce its image of being socially responsible. Finally, unlike the aforementioned cases, **C8**’s nature determined that it did not share the same focus on collaboration. The large volume of the firm’s self-initiated programmes, projects, and events occupied the bulk of its social media presence and almost left no space for the ‘reciprocal promotion’ discussed earlier (i.e. the interviewee answered: ‘*no, not really, coz we have so much stuff to talk about ourselves*’ (**C8**) when asked ‘*do you normally collaborate with your partners on social media?*’ (**C8**)). This explains why the company rarely endorsed its peers’ activities and vice-versa (i.e. **C8**’s ‘external



acknowledgement' was largely dependent upon press rather than other companies in the same industry).

Finally, **C2** exemplifies how its industrial nature underpins the firm's primary focus on its engagement with the local community on social media. In this case, industrial nature is signified by the firm's geographical location and the shared characteristics of the target audience. Specifically, **C2** features a puppet-making venue located in Rossendale – a district filled with rural villages. The venue is surrounded by Southeast Asia community and hence Southeast Asians residing in the area are considered as the firm's target audience. As affirmed by the interviewee, in general, the geographical location, to a large extent, restricted the engagement among the residents:

*'...the geographic location of Rossendale is small, but it actually spreads over a valley, so, people don't interact, even though there might be six or seven villages in the area, they don't constantly interact...'* (**C2**).

In addition to the geographical restraint, the ethnic background of the bulk of the local residents (i.e. Southeast Asians) also further impedes the engagement, especially between them and the theatre companies in the region (i.e. *'Southeast Asia community engaging with the theatre company has always been an issue, you know, the sensitivity around that'* (**C2**)). Here, the restraint mostly stems from the sensitiveness of the stated ethnic group (i.e. it might be subject to religious belief or culture).

Given the restraints explained above, **C2**'s social media management was largely relationship-laden (i.e. this also rationalises why relationship-oriented OIM strategies pervaded **C2**'s social media postings). According to the interviewee's reflection, the key tactical move was to extensively use *'hashtags, tags, [and] sharing'* (**C2**) on social media in an attempt to create the relationship with the locals. Most importantly, such a tactic was cemented by establishing rapport with the locals through offline activities in the first place. To be specific, **C2** had to resort to 'knock-on-doors' approach with

which the initial engagement was galvanised (i.e. *‘we have to go to people’ (C2)*). Building on the face-to-face interactions, the firm continued to encourage the locals to increase their social media participation and from this point gradually started strengthening the relationship. Evidence is provided below:

*‘So, in terms of this valley, we have to go face-to-face, smaller events, you know, highlight that: ‘we are here and you are present, sign up’...so, we invite them to come and comment, to review, you know, to tag, to share, so, they know that we are there. Once they sign up, they slowly start building relationships with us. So, that’s how ‘in order to get them on social media, we have to see them face-to-face” (C2).*

### **7.3.8 Functionality of social media**

The data hints that the functionality of social media platforms helps optimise the management of social media postings and the corresponding OIM practice. Firstly, Facebook and Twitter were the most pervasively used social media platforms and the way they were used by each individual case was varied. For instance, the interviewee of **C1** recognised that Facebook replaced its official website as the main venue where their audiences sought information regarding the programmes initiated by the firm (i.e. *‘because many people don’t go to a website any more, they go to Facebook directly to find information about people which is a shame coz we have a website’ (C1)*), whereas Twitter facilitated the her company’s interaction with other organisations in the industry in a way that could showcase the social networks of the company (i.e. *‘I think Twitter is used more to interact with other organisations, with our friends, so you kind of like talk to people, retweet, and you can post something that’s really silly, you can post something like: ‘oh, good morning, it’s a really nice sunny day”’ (C1)*). The interviewee also pointed out that Facebook, apart from information broadcast, was more effective than Twitter in targeting audiences and sometimes ‘enforcing’ responses from the targeted by sharing and tagging people in photos (i.e. *‘when on*

*Facebook, you can immediately share and tag someone, you say: 'hi, I think you'd be interested in that'; so, it's more targeted; Twitter is a bit more like everywhere... if one of my events is more important than others, it'll have more prominence on Facebook than on Twitter' (C1)).* In this regard, it could be inferred that the functionality of tagging might spark the extensive usage of imagery. As one of the dominant trends on social media, this functionality deepens the relationship between the firm and its target audiences by stimulating and intensifying the mutual communications (i.e. *'I started using many more pictures, because you can tag people in the pictures and that's a great way for people to retweet because sometimes they have to respond because you tag them' (C1)).*

Also, the interviewee of **C4** affirmed that Facebook facilitated *'deeper engagement'* (**C4**) than the other platforms due to its ability to share content throughout the news feed of one's social networks and this refined the dissemination of the relevant information (i.e. *'because they can share your content on their feed with their friends, it's great for promoting word-of-mouth' (C4)).* Meanwhile, Twitter enabled the immediate circulation of a large volume of messages so that it was deemed as the most efficient platform to increase the awareness of the firm's promotions (i.e. *'Twitter is the best in terms of promoting events, and issuing a large volume of messages out that people might pick up on' (C4)).* Most intriguingly, Instagram served as a venue for experimentation, in which case the networked artists were granted the access to the firm's Instagram account and were allowed to upload photos of their own choosing (i.e. *'we have invited artists to take over our Instagram, and post from it for a day, or for a period of days' (C4)).* Nonetheless, Facebook might not be eligible for such an experimentation as the design of its algorithm might worsen the effect if the experimentation failed to increase traffic (i.e. *'experiment on Facebook might affect*

*your future reach, if you post one piece of content that people don't find engaging, Facebook will decrease your reach in the future'* (C4)). It is due to the imagery-centric nature of Instagram that empowered the audiences to be exposed to the off-stage insights that were traditionally concealed from them (i.e. *'they want behind-the-scene insights, we give them behind-the-scene insights'* (C4)). The behind-the-scene insights materialised and popularised by Instagram were believed to contextualise the promoted projects and hence further consolidate the audience engagement.

Moreover, as addressed in **Section 7.3.6**, social media analytics such as Facebook Insights (i.e. a functionality to track user interaction on Facebook homepage) were capitalised on by SMEs to gauge the efficacy of their social media posts. In simplistic terms, this is materialised by assessing what content generates relatively higher level of interactivity (e.g. number of shares, likes, comments, and clicks). For instance, C5's practitioner admitted that she was enabled to have a better understanding of what appeals to her firm's target audience (i.e. *'if you've got a good image and a nice sentence that goes with it, it works really well on Instagram'* (C5)). In light of the feedback gained from the social media analytics, she decided to shift the style of her firm's social media activities from being discursive (*'our posts were quite sporadic'* (C5)) to being comparatively more purposive (i.e. *'now we are posting kind of everyday and it's got much more focus on the exhibitions or things that are going on the building rather than kind of random [C5]-related things'* (C5)). Moreover, an alternative function is that social media analytics can also be used to discern audience demographics. For instance, social media analytics was used by C5 to facilitate their audience segmentation (i.e. *'we break down our audiences into six different sections'* (C5)). It is noteworthy that the content was constructed to cover all the segments of their target audiences so that all of them can be firmly engaged with (*'it's making sure*

that throughout the whole week, there's something relevant to each of the six categories' (C5)). Further, social media analytics were used for content differentiation on each social media platform. For example, C7's interviewee articulated that the firm's social media management was fundamentally facilitated by ensuring that *'we are engaging the people we think are using that platform'* (C7). Thus, drawing upon social media analytics, she differentiated, to a noticeable extent, the posts on each platform and the differences are displayed in **Table 32** below:

**Table 32: Varied Content and Functionality across Social Media Platforms**

| Social Media Platform | Major Content  | Main Functionality                   | Evidence  |
|-----------------------|--|--------------------------------------|---|
| Facebook              | General Information (e.g. notification of ticket sales)                | Circulation of information           | <i>'...it's very much about the information of the productions'</i> (C7)                          |
| Twitter               | News and updates (e.g. retweeting a partner's tweet)                   | Interaction with others (e.g. Press) | <i>'...on Twitter, it was more like news stories, or updates...'</i> (C7)                         |
| Instagram             | 'Behind-the-scene' (BTS) imagery (e.g. photos of off-stage rehearsals) | Insights sharing                     | <i>'...obviously with Instagram, it's very much 'behind the scenes''</i> (C7)                     |
| YouTube*              | Show recordings (e.g. rehearsal videos)                                | Provision of visualised content      | <i>'...the recordings of the cast reading some of the books, which we put up on YouTube'</i> (C7) |

\*it is noteworthy that in this case YouTube was not a regularly updated platform as access to the content that best fitted YouTube was often restricted (i.e. the interviewee uncovered that she sometimes underwent difficulties in creating the content for YouTube: *'but the next production, we were more limited to accessing the cast'* (C7)).

It is worth highlighting that although the publicised content might be identical across different platforms, the way it was presented sometimes differed significantly. For instance, the interviewee claimed that although press reviews gained publicity on both Facebook and Twitter, *'the wording of the messaging might be different because different people are engaging our Facebook and Twitter'* (C7). More importantly, the functionality of Twitter dictated that press reviews were prioritised and gathered more awareness rather than Facebook due to the interviewee's understanding that *'the nature of Twitter is that it's fast, isn't it? So, you can put up more'* (C7). Also, the 'fastness' of Twitter permitted a larger volume of interactions (e.g. retweeting) with

other organisations (e.g. partners) online (i.e. *'I think it'd be more interactions on Twitter than on other platforms'* (C7)).

The data also illustrates that some built-in functions underpin the management of social media postings. One typical function is Facebook Advertising. Taking an example of C8, since it was acknowledged that these two social media channels were outperformed by off-line, physical marketing in driving ticket sales (i.e. *'the main way for us to sell tickets is direct mail, so, sending out brochures is by far the most efficient way to drive sales'* (C8)), the company's interest pertained more directly to exploring and capitalising on the demographic profiling of its audiences (i.e. *'it's not that many advertising channels available to us where we can be so specific in knowing who we are talking to'* (C8)). Driven by such a purpose, the company found effective the Facebook Advertising, which allowed for targeting like-minded audiences (i.e. *'the other thing that I really like on Facebook in terms of advertising is to target look-alike audiences'* (C8)). Such a built-in function enabled a message to be directed at the right recipient without any prior interaction (i.e. *'if you like folk music, if you like a particular artist, I can appear on your Facebook feed as a paid Ad without you liking my page at all'* (C8)). As a consequence, this functionality was believed to largely increase the efficacy of any OIM-related messages because it fine-tuned the dissemination of, and secured the reach of the messages.

Another function that was particularly referred to is live streaming. For instance, the interviewee of C4 proclaimed that the company benefited immensely from live streaming (i.e. 'Facebook Live' & 'Instagram Stories') as it granted people access to a show without physical presence (i.e. *'it becomes part of daily life of how people expect to receive news; it brings them closer to something happening elsewhere in the world or even live streaming performance from the same city, if they're unable to*

attend' (C4)). Also, C6 reportedly experimented with live streaming (i.e. 'Facebook Live' & 'Periscope') and found it was efficacious to intensify the publicity:

*'yeah, I think so and actually some of the video features that come out a bit more recently have been helpful for us like Facebook Live that has been one that we've used, and that's been quite promising for us and I think we'd like to do more of it... it's just that thing about reaching Twitter audiences through videos as well' (C6).*

#### 7.4 Summary

In order to answer **RQ3** (i.e. what organisational qualities have affected SMEs' OIM practice on social media?), a total of seven organisational qualities affecting SMEs' OIM practice on social media, as shown in **Table 33**, have been identified. Drawing upon Lampadarios's (2017: p. 52) SMEs success factors framework, the identified organisational qualities are categorised into three classes: 1) individual quality including 'nature of practitioner'; 2) enterprise qualities including 'division of roles and responsibilities', 'work routine', 'work principle', and 'evaluation system'; and 3) business environment qualities including 'nature of industry' and 'functionality of social media'. It is evident that individual quality mainly focuses on practitioners' personal traits including their experience gained from early life, occupational background, and habits for socialising online. Enterprise qualities feature 1) how the duty of each team member in managing an SME's social media accounts is defined; 2) how regulatory procedures of SMEs' social media management are mapped out; 3) how guidelines for SMEs' social media management are established; and 4) how the evaluation system is deployed to gauge the efficacy of SMEs' social media management. Business environment qualities primarily involve 1) industry-related attributes including pursuit in creativity and social ties with local communities; and 2) functionality of social media as in facilitating SMEs' showcasing of their social networks. All the identified organisational qualities signify the influence of SMEs'

personnel, internal organisation, and external environment on the overall organisational impressions being fostered and such an influence is further interpreted in the next chapter. Also, additional case descriptions are provided with regard to practitioners' self-reflections on what constitutes 1) the main content shared on their social media accounts; 2) their target audiences on social media, and 3) their OIM activities on social media. Such descriptions suggest that 1) SMEs tend to post similar content on social media; 2) SMEs' target audiences overlap on social media; and 3) SMEs lack a sophisticated understanding of OIM and their social media activities are not guided by the purpose of perpetuating particular impressions. Overall, all the findings presented in the three empirical chapters are discussed in relation to relevant literature in the next chapter.



**Table 33: Summary of Organisational Qualities Affecting SMEs' OIM Practice on Social Media**

| SMEs      | Organisational qualities  |  |   |   |  |   |  |
|-----------|---|--|---|---|--|---|--|
|           | Nature of Practitioner  | Division of Roles and Responsivities   | Work Routine  | Work Principle  | Evaluation System  | Nature of Industry  | Functionality of Social Media  |
| <b>C1</b> | The professional use of social media is influenced by 1) <b>personal habits</b> (e.g. the interviewee claimed that the firm accounts were 'inter-linked' with her personal accounts); and 2) <b>prior experience</b> (e.g. 'we all are sort of permeate, allowing our personalities to flow onto the company')      | <b>Vaguely defined duties</b> (e.g. loggings of social media accounts were shared by the three founders and they could all post things without notifying others: 'we all have the loggings, so we can all do...' and <b>C1</b> lacks strategic planning of social media posts: <i>I don't think we have much time for that</i> ) | <b>Relatively contingent work routine</b> (e.g. <i>every now and then, maybe lunch time...I'll have a look at what's going on. If there's something that I think would be interesting to interact with, or just post something, if we are doing any programme</i> ) | <b>No obvious principle</b> (e.g. mostly intuition-based: 'There's no [guideline-wise] rule, we give the code to anyone else because sometimes we give the code to our volunteers') | <b>No obvious evaluation system</b> (e.g. 'really, I haven't paid much attention to audience reviews')   | <b>Collaboration encouraged in the industry</b> (e.g. 'I don't think we have competitors' and 'because one of the things that this city does very well is many of the cultural companies or organisations work together...')  | <b>Built-in functionality</b> (e.g. tagging: 'I started using many more pictures, because you can tag people in the pictures and that's a great way for people to retweet because sometimes, they have to respond because you tag them')   |
| <b>C2</b> | The professional use of social media is influenced by 1) <b>occupational background</b> (e.g. multiple roles simultaneously: see <b>Section 8.3.2</b> for details); and 2) personal habits (e.g. emotional link to the local communities: 'I have an emotional attachment to the community because I grew up here') | <b>Clearly defined duties</b> (e.g. 'we do have a shared team, so, it's actually sharing resources, so, I do have volunteers and staff, who don't do social media, but they do the grassroots marketing')  | <b>Relatively systematic work routine</b> (e.g. 'I'd say I have to be quite smart with how I plan my daily activities' and 'I do spend a lot of time researching what needs to go out, meeting the people, and then, in essence, scheduling the posts')             | <b>Principle of 'engagingness'</b> ('constantly engaging people' and 'becoming a community hub')  | <b>Trial and error approach</b> (e.g. using social media analytics to find out posting too early for events was not good for information outreach) | <b>Collaboration encouraged in the industry</b> (e.g. 'sometimes we do a partnership which benefits us')<br><b>Deep engagement with local communities</b> (e.g. since '...the geographic location of Rossendale is small, but it actually spreads over a valley, so, people don't interact', <b>C2</b> aims to 'constantly engage people' by extensively using 'hashtags, tags, and sharing' on social media) | <b>Built-in functionality</b> (e.g. 'Facebook Live function, it's been effective');<br><b>Social media analytics</b> (e.g. '...what risk that we can take to find out if something will work, systems are what we know work, and then evaluating the systems to see how effective they are [with social media analytics]') |
| <b>C3</b> | The professional use of social media is influenced by 1) <b>prior experience</b> (e.g. '[it is] purely based on the personal experience');  | <b>Clearly demarcated duties</b> (e.g. '...the majority of people who work here...aren't purely office-based, they go out and  | <b>Relatively contingent work routine</b> (e.g. 'I check out to see if there's any news   | <b>Principle of 'relevance'</b> (e.g. we try to post things that are relevant to our  | <b>Evaluation of audience preferences</b> (e.g. 'so, we did kind of look at the  | <b>Business nature of being pro-social</b> (e.g. since <b>C3</b> 's nature is 'theatre for social   | <b>Built-in functionality</b> (e.g. 'We're gonna be doing it [Facebook advertising] coz they   |

|           |  |  |  |   |  |  |  |
|-----------|--|--|--|---|--|--|--|
|           | and 2) <b>occupational background</b> (e.g. ‘strategy swap’ between like-minded SMEs)  | <i>deliver workshops...I have to stay at the office...managing day-to-day finances, salaries, and I do the marketing, which is about social media strategy’)</i>   | <i>stories, or anything happening globally that is relevant to any of our programmes at the moment’)</i>   | <i>programme or directly related to our programme’);</i><br><b>Principle of ‘engagingness’</b> (e.g. ‘we want to engage with people, so we try to start conversations and be friendly and relaxed’) | <i>feedback to kind of say what does each get... responded well...’);</i><br><b>Evaluation of audience demographics</b> (e.g. ‘obviously we were targeting very different people...just looking at who your audience is and what is all you want’) | change’, they tend to ‘link up with lots of councillors on Twitter coz lots of councillors, our local MPs, MEPs...try and get them interested in our activities...’)   | <i>were really so successful...and...people responded well to it...’);</i><br><b>Social media analytics</b> (e.g. ‘we work with people who are in quite vulnerable situations...and...they traditionally don’t engage as much with social media. But, it is a good way of getting information out there...we get click-throughs [on social media] and people become aware of our website’) |
| <b>C4</b> | The professional use of social media is affected by 1) <b>personal habits</b> (e.g. regularly observing other firms’ social media activities using personal accounts: ‘I observe that on a daily basis’ and ‘knowing how to do social media is all about, is largely about intuition, experimentation, and hands-on approach’) | <b>Explicitly demarcated duties</b> that capitalise on each individual’s expertise (e.g. ‘I had a marketing and communication intern who was working with me full time for one year. I had a digital communication officer which was a part-time position based in the office. We also worked with a marketing consultant in a more strategic level’ and artists taking over C4’s Instagram account, which is referred to as ‘social experimentation’) | <b>Relatively systematic work routine</b> (e.g. ‘...every week I’d have a plan or an idea of what communications need to go out via social media. In that week...and then I’d consider what we roll this out across different channels, what the main messages [are], what media we should use...I also issue these messages out on all the different channels...as well as this, every day I’d monitor how existing content is doing and anything that’s been published, what’s the reaction...’) | <b>Principle of ‘relevance’</b> (e.g. ‘[social media posts] must bear some relation to what [C4] does’)   | <b>Trial and error approach</b> (e.g. ‘intuition, experimentation, and hands-on approach’)   | <b>Collaboration encouraged in the industry</b> (e.g. ‘we all work really closely together...and this extends to social media, where we tend to promote each other’s messages, and we help each other out. It also gives out a message about you’re not acting in isolation, you are part of an arts ecology within the city’) | <b>Built-in functionality</b> (e.g. news feed: ‘because they can share your content on their feed with their friends, it’s great for promoting word-of-mouth’); Behind-the-scene content (e.g. ‘we have invited artists to take over our Instagram, and post from it for a day, or for a period of days’); <b>Behind-the-scene content</b> (e.g. ‘Instagram Stories’)                      |
| <b>C5</b> | The professional use of social media is affected by 1)   | <b>Clearly defined duties</b> (e.g. two relatively autonomous  | <b>Relatively systematic work routine</b> (e.g.  | <b>Principle of ‘relevance’</b> (e.g.   | <b>Evaluation of audience</b>  | <b>Business nature of being creative</b> (e.g.   | <b>Social media analytics</b> (e.g. analytics are used   |

|    |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|----|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
|    | <p><b>occupational background</b> (e.g. skills learned from a previous job: ‘I used to manage the social media accounts for [a well-known travel agency]’ and from a training course: ‘I went to a two-day training course...on social media and how to run accounts, but it also had quite a focus on the analytics and getting the best out of that’)</p>  | <p>practitioners working in collaboration: ‘I look after the marketing and communications team’ and ‘he kind of puts out the posts on social media’)</p>   | <p>‘So, we schedule quite a few things, and that’s done in an in-depth basis weekly...’)</p>   | <p>‘relevance is a key factor so that could be relevance to an external factor...something happening in the world...the dates of our exhibitions...the time leading up to a workshop or a project: I think they are kind of the key things for putting things out on social media’);</p> <p><b>Principle of ‘engagingness’</b> (e.g. ‘we need to make sure that whatever we do as an organisation, we are aiming to hit each of those audience sectors, making sure that we are engaging with them; making sure that we talk to them through social media is always quite positive’)</p> | <p><b>demographics</b> (e.g. ‘the people under the age of 25 engage with us much more on Facebook than they do on Twitter; Twitter, we tend to engage kind of older audiences’);</p> <p><b>Evaluation of audience preferences</b> (e.g. ‘it’s making sure that throughout the whole week, there’s something relevant to each of the six categories’)</p> <p><b>Trial and error approach</b> (e.g. ‘our posts were quite sporadic whereas now we...got much more focus on the exhibitions or things that are going on the building rather than kind of random [C5]-related things’)</p> | <p><b>C5’s</b> pursuit of technology and creativity is exemplified by its use of creative function named 360-degree video)</p>   | <p>to understand audience preference: ‘if you’ve got a good image and a nice sentence that goes with it, it works really well on Instagram’; and also audience demographics: ‘we break down our audiences into six different sections’)</p>                                    |
| C6 | <p>The professional use of social media is influenced by 1) <b>personal habits</b> (e.g. ‘just that perhaps when you are an individual, you know that you are quite likely to look at posts with images in or videos in, that kind of things, so when you are working on an account, you might think that’s the content that’s more interesting than texting, perhaps in that kind of way’); and</p> <p><b>occupational background</b> (e.g. previous career: ‘I’ve been running social media accounts for</p> | <p><b>Clearly defined duties</b> (e.g. ‘so, I tend to do the planning side of things and the marketing coordinator will do most of the actual writing and scheduling. So it tends to work that way but we share it between ourselves’.</p> | <p><b>Relatively systematic work routine</b> (e.g. ‘Starting at the beginning, we have a social media planner...’ and ‘The next stage is we use a social media planning tool called Hootsuite...’)</p> | <p><b>Principle of ‘relevance’</b> (e.g. ‘we aim to post things that we think are really relevant to our audience’)</p>  | <p><b>Evaluation of audience preferences</b> (e.g. ‘I’m trying to make sure that the posts don’t have any art terminology or specialist language, make sure it’s really accessible; and yeah trying to make it as approachable as possible for the general visitors</p>  | <p><b>Collaboration encouraged in the industry</b> (e.g. ‘we don’t feel that we are kind of competing for people in the way that perhaps Sony and Samsung are competing for TV sales: you’re only gonna buy one TV, but you can come to more than one arts exhibitions’)</p> | <p><b>Built-in functionality</b> (e.g. live streaming: ‘yeah, I think so and actually some of the video features that come out a bit more recently have been helpful for us like Facebook Live that has been one that we’ve used, and that’s been quite promising for us’)</p> |

|    |  |   |  |   |  |  |  |
|----|--|---|--|---|--|--|--|
|    | organisations for probably about 7 years' and 'strategy swap': 'I meet up with other organisations and we'd swap stories about what we feel has worked well or hasn't')  |   |  |   | coming through the door');<br><b>Evaluation of audience demographics</b> (e.g. 'Twitter allows us to do more of the messages that perhaps are for our art specialist audience like residencies and specific news about artists')   |  |  |
| C7 | The professional use of social media is affected by 1) <b>occupational background</b> (see Table 8.3.2 for details); and 2) <b>personal habits</b> (e.g. monitoring other firms' social media activities using personal accounts: 'I [referring to her personal accounts] follow a lot of theatre accounts...it's interesting to see what works for them...')  | <b>Clearly defined duties</b> (e.g. three staff members working in a democratic, collaborative way: see Table 8.3.3 for details)  | <b>Relatively systematic work routine</b> (e.g. 'I make sure that they're all scheduled properly and then the stuff that I already have, the content that I can already use, I use Hootsuite and keep that so that it's ready to go')  | <b>Principle of 'engagingness'</b> (e.g. 'we want to engage our people'; 'we are very inclusive'; 'we want people to feel welcome'; and 'if it's a blog, I'll say, you know, to be informative')            | <b>Trial and error approach</b> (e.g. repeating the successful social media campaign last year)  | <b>Collaboration encouraged in the industry</b> (e.g. 'we don't see ourselves in competition, it's very much we work together to bring art to life in the region, so, I guess it does do a favour, but also it's helping to promote arts that other people might enjoy, that we don't necessarily have') | <b>Social media analytics</b> (e.g. analytics are used to discern audience demographics: 'we are engaging the people we think are using that platform'); <b>Behind-the-scene content</b> (e.g. '...obviously with Instagram, it's very much 'behind the scenes'')  |
| C8 | The professional use of social media is affected by 1) <b>occupational background</b> (e.g. workshop: 'the guy who runs their account...gave us a day's kind of workshop, just sharing his knowledge, which is really, really useful' and the interviewee's background in music industry: 'if you know nothing about classical music, I think it's quite hard to differentiate amongst all the stuff out there about what is funny, quirky, and unusual about, | <b>Clearly defined duties</b> (e.g. 'essentially, my role would be to ideally look over what the marketing team is proposing in terms of social media support, also I have my ears to the ground, just in terms of the interesting things I see online and I see happening in the building, so that I can make suggestions to the head of marketing [team] whether or not it might be good to take this one, whatever it is, and put it on social media') | <b>Relatively systematic work routine</b> (e.g. 'we have an overall marketing plan that covers all our activity... obviously social media...and each channel is effectively its own tab of spread sheet; so we have weekly marketing meetings; we talk about what needs to happen social media-wise, we are having | <b>Principle of 'engagingness'</b> (e.g. 'I think it's about deepening the relationship we have with particular customers both locally, who come to the concerts, but also nationally and internationally') | <b>Trial and error approach</b> (e.g. '[with social media analytics] I'd say the posts that are really intended to drive tickets sales particularly are generally paid posts that we do; the things that are not paid need to have an angle of some kind, unless we are kind of doing a favour for someone') | <b>Less collaboration in the industry</b> (e.g. no, not really, coz we have so much stuff to talk about ourselves')  | <b>Built-in function</b> (e.g. 'the other thing that I really like on Facebook in terms of advertising is to target look-alike audiences'); <b>Social media analytics</b> (e.g. 'it's not that many advertising channels available to us where we can be so specific in knowing who we are talking to, [except for social media]') |

|  |  |  |  |  |   |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|--|---|--|--|
|  | <i>whatever it is, that would attract people on social media')</i> |  | <i>editorial meetings that kind of plan out further in advance, and we still...when I notice something that would be good for a particular day for a particular reason, that would go in the schedule quite far advanced')</i> |  | <i>and 'we used to not have a social media plan at all; it was very ad-hoc...Now it's much more planned')</i> |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|--|---|--|--|

## CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION

### 8.1 Introduction

Given the findings presented in *Chapter 5, 6, and 7*, this chapter offers an exhaustive discussion of the findings with reference to prior literature. It substantiates the insights of the current study as to how the findings driven by each research question extend the extant knowledge in OIM studies. Accordingly, plausible justifications for the association between the findings and extant theories are also provided. Apart from the introduction, the remainder of this chapter is structured by firstly summarising the key findings of the present study (as a warm-up to remind the readers of what has been presented in *Chapter 5, 6, and 7*). The second section elaborates how the findings of the present study contribute to the current OIM literature. These findings are based on the three interrelated research questions that were established to explore: 1) organisational impressions projected by SMEs online (**RQ1**); 2) OIM strategies implemented by SMEs on social media (**RQ2**); and 3) qualitative factors affecting SMEs' OIM practice on social media (**RQ3**). Further, broader implications for the overall OIM theories drawn from the triangulation based on the three sets of findings are provided. The final section features a summary of the pre-discussed insights.

### 8.2 Summary of Key Findings

The key findings of this study are threefold. Firstly, four organisational impressions have been identified including professionalism, social responsibility, attractiveness, and creativity in order to discern how SMEs prefer to be viewed in the eyes of their social media audiences. Secondly, with the purpose of exploring how OIM is strategized by SMEs on social media, a taxonomy of OIM strategies have been developed, which embodies two main sets of OIM strategies: qualification-oriented and relationship-oriented strategies. Finally, seven organisational qualities that have

affected SMEs' OIM practice on social media have been identified so as to deepen the understanding of how OIM is shaped within the specified settings. These organisational qualities can be classified into three categories: 1) individual quality (i.e. nature of practitioner); 2) enterprise qualities (i.e. division of roles and responsibilities, work routine, work principle, and evaluation system); and 3) business environment qualities (i.e. nature of business and functionality of social media). Hence, it is of critical importance to discuss the implications of these findings in relation to the research context and the existing body of knowledge as follows.

## 8.3 Discussion

### 8.3.1 Organisational Impressions

This section discusses how the findings presented in *Chapter 5*, which serve to answer **RQ1** (i.e. how do SMEs desire to be perceived online?) are integrated with prior literature. In doing so, this section features an in-depth comparison between the identified organisational impressions (based on **RQ1**) and the ones derived from extant literature (i.e. Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999 as cited in Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016). These two groups of organisational impressions are briefly outlined in *Table 34* as follows:

***Table 34: Relationship between the Existing and the Identified Organisational Impressions***

| Organisational impressions identified in the current study | Relationship      | Organisational impressions extracted from prior research* |
|--|-------------------|---|
| Professionalism  | Partially related | Competence  |
| Social Responsibility                                      |                   | Moral Worthiness  |
| Attractiveness   |                   | Likeability   |
| Creativity   | Non-related       | Dangerousness   |
|  |                   | Weakness/Neediness  |

\*The organisational impressions displayed in the right column were extracted from Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo (1999) as cited in Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris (2016). These organisational impressions were originally formulated by Jones & Pittman (1982).

#### 8.3.1.1 Professionalism vs Competence

There are a number of notable similarities and differences between the existing and the identified organisational impressions. First, 'professionalism' and 'competence'

are overlapped in the area where both constructs are typified by organisational abilities/achievements (Spear, 2015; Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2007; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Jones & Pittman, 1982). However, ‘competence’, as suggested by Jones & Pittman (1982: p. 241), was initially symbolised by either referring to ‘*general ability level*’ or ‘*specific skill*’, both of which pertained to IM enacted by individuals in interpersonal interactions. Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo’s (1999) taxonomy directly extrapolates such meanings to organisational settings without giving an extensive account of how ‘competence’ adapts to the characteristics of organisational settings. In other words, the existing taxonomy underplays what ‘competence’ denotes at the organisational level. Therefore, in the existing taxonomy, ‘competence’ can only be understood as exclusively associated with organisational abilities/achievement.

As opposed to such a singular meaning, ‘professionalism’ identified in this study is a multifaceted construct. It is represented, aside from achievements, by also diversity, capacity, quality of work, and quality of networks/association). Given the underlying meanings of all the sub-themes, ‘professionalism’ entails an organisational stance and hence can be discerned as ‘*institutional circumstances in which the members of occupations...control work*’ (Freidson, 2001: p. 12). In other words, ‘professionalism’ is intimately associated with standards expected out of a given profession (Martimianakis, Maniate, & Hodges, 2009) and hence it should be demonstrated in ‘*contextualised practice*’ (Burford et al., 2014: p. 371). Given the findings presented in **Chapter 5**, the contextualised practice is mainly represented by emphasising quality. Here, quality is primarily reflected in the quality of work (e.g. provision of bespoke services), quality of networks/association (e.g. membership of a distinguished group), diversity (e.g. the range of work undertaken by an SME) and capacity (e.g. the



extent to which an SME is able to accommodate its customers). Such an emphasis primarily results from SMEs' restrained access to market power (Stokes & Wilson, 2006; Storey & Greene, 2010). In order to survive the competition against large firms, SMEs have to rely on alternative ways, one of which is enhancement of quality (Saridakis et al., 2008; Storey & Greene, 2010). Overall, it is intriguing to learn the fact that SMEs indeed attempt to profile themselves as being professional, since extant literature often discredits SMEs for their lack of professionalism in top management including lack of qualified staff and functional knowhow (Halme & Korpela, 2014; López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017; Storey & Greene, 2010; Stokes & Wilson, 2006; Cosh et al., 2005). To sum up, as Jones & Pittman (1982: P. 245) admits that 'competence' can be confined by '*particular culture or situational context*', 'professionalism' thereby can be interpreted as situationally contextualised 'competence' (i.e. with SME settings). In this regard, 'professionalism' is considered as an organisational attribute that fits the settings of SMEs.

### **8.3.1.2 Social Responsibility vs Moral Worthiness**

Secondly, 'social responsibility' bears certain resemblance to 'moral worthiness' due to the fact that they both indicate a firm's charitable purposes. 'Moral worthiness' is a relatively all-encompassing concept that entails virtues of being '*honest, disciplined, charitable, self-abnegating, generous, and self-sacrificing*' (Jones & Pittman, 1982: p. 245; p. 247). These virtues, however, are the ones developed under the premise of IM at the individual level as evidently they are used to define the moral character of human beings (Jones & Pittman, 1982). Although these virtues were subsequently transplanted to the organisational level in order to symbolise organisations' commitment to various qualities of society (Bolino et al., 2008), they were mostly seen in corporate responsibility pertaining to environmental protection (e.g. Orlitzky,

Siegel, & Waldman, 2011; Solomon et al., 2013) and organisational diversity (e.g. Long, Doerer & Stewart, 2015). Unlike ‘moral worthiness’, ‘social responsibility’ attains a comparatively more confined scope, since it primarily reflects an SME’s commitment to the well-being of the surrounding communities (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017; Orlitzky et al., 2011; Galbreath, 2017). It is evident that ‘social responsibility’ builds on SMEs’ pro-social status, meaning that charitable activities are likely to be part of their daily operations. *Table 35* concisely outlines the pro-social activities of each sample firm as evidence:

***Table 35: Pro-Social Activities of Sample firms***

| <b>SMEs</b> | <b>Examples of Pro-Social Activities</b>  | <b>Beneficiaries of the Activities</b> |
|-------------|---|--|
| <b>C1</b>   | Provide free space for practising art and professional training for young people who desire to be artists | Young talents in local communities     |
| <b>C2</b>   | Organise free events to help Southeast Asian immigrants to settle in                                      | Immigrants in local communities        |
| <b>C3</b>   | Craft a play themed around homelessness   | Homeless people in the area            |
| <b>C4</b>   | Host an art exhibition to raise funds for asylum seekers  | Asylum seekers in the region           |
| <b>C5</b>   | Organise free events for families especially those with children  | Families in the region                 |
| <b>C6</b>   | Create a programme for the disabled to engage with art  | Disabled people in local communities   |
| <b>C7</b>   | Initiate a project for young people to participate in theatrical performance                              | Youngsters in local communities        |
| <b>C8</b>   | Provide a music-making programme for vulnerable children  | Vulnerable children in the city        |

\*Source: Findings presented in *Chapter 5 & 6*.

Noticeably, projecting a socially responsible image is beneficial for SMEs as sample firms, according to the findings presented in *Chapter 7*, often acquire resources (e.g. volunteers) from surrounding communities and in return provide accessible services (e.g. free tickets to theatrical plays) to the locals. Under this premise, SMEs’ emphasis on ‘social responsibility’ nurtures information exchange and long-term collaboration, thereby establishing rapport between SMEs and their surrounding communities (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017). Further, such rapport is likely to render positive the attitudes towards the SMEs’ products (e.g. perceived quality of a play) and also enhance customer loyalty (Van de Ven & Jeurissen, 2005; Du et al., 2007; Torres et

al., 2012; Gras-Gil et al., 2016; Galbreath, 2017). In doing so, SMEs, which maintain robust links with their communities, are powered to make positive their perceived organisational image (Perrini, 2006). In contrast, large firms do not have close ties to communities and locality (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017), since they do not maintain the same level of intimacy between their personnel and their local communities (e.g. SMEs organise more face-to-face events to communicate with the locals) (Sen & Cowley, 2013; López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017). Consequently, social responsibility remains an inherent virtue for SMEs and it is largely dictated by their commitment to local communities.

#### **8.3.1.3 Attractiveness vs likeability**

‘Attractiveness’ is analogous to ‘likeability’, as both are associated with the demonstration of appealing traits. The subtle difference is that the former is mainly involved with SMEs’ facilities that serve to enhance customer experience (e.g. facilities such as garden, rocket, restaurant, inflatable plants, and sand to increase convenience and stimulate immersive experience). Meanwhile, the latter is simply deemed as an end-product of ingratiating behaviours (Karam, Sekaja, & Geldenhuys, 2016; Bolino et al., 2008; Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2007; Jones & Pittman, 1982). For instance, in order to be perceived likeable by an audience, one may ingratiate this particular audience (Karam, Sekaja, & Geldenhuys, 2016; Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2007; Jones & Pittman, 1982). In this regard, ‘likeability’ intrinsically incorporates a variety of personality traits that serve to ingratiate others such as ‘*warmth, humour, reliability, charm, and physical attractiveness*’ (Jones & Pittman, 1982: p. 235). Some of these personality traits may not be applicable in the organisational context such as charm and physical attractiveness. It is worth noting that although personality traits can be enacted by entrepreneurs who act as the

representative of their venues (e.g. see Parhankangas & Ehrlich (2014); Benson et al. (2015); and Shepherd & Haynie (2011) for details), it goes beyond the scope of this study. In this study, SMEs' preference to be perceived as attractive mainly reflects the fact that they highly value customer loyalty (Van de Ven & Jeurissen, 2005; Du et al., 2007) as they strive to entertain and satisfy customers by illustrating the appealing attributions of their facilities. Overall, it is explicit that 'attractiveness' is an organisational impression that typifies SMEs' tendency on customer loyalty, whereas 'likeability' largely partakes features of IM at the individual level (Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2007; Young, Gardner, & Gilbert, 1994).

#### **8.3.1.4 Creativity vs Dangerousness and Weakness/Neediness**

Finally, 'creativity' is the organisational impression that has not been documented in the existing taxonomy (i.e. Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999), or any recent implementation of the taxonomy (e.g. Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016; Tata & Prasad, 2015). This is, first of all, because novelty of products/services is crucial to the survival of SMEs as they can barely benefit from scale economies (Van Praag & Versloot, 2007; López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017). Put differently, in response to the lack of market power and resources, SMEs are highly motivated to commercialise innovations (Van Praag & Versloot, 2007; Durand & Coeurderoy, 2001). Also, the nature of creative industries where sample firms are established may be another factor as SMEs in the specified industries (e.g. visual art, theatre, puppetry, technology-led art, and performing art) normally seek to generate and exploit intellectual property through creativity (DCMS, 2001; Nesta, 2017). As a consequence, sample firms' preference to be perceived as creative is shaped by SMEs' pursuit in innovation and the core value of creative industries.

Whilst being viewed as dangerous and needy has been the integral part of the existing taxonomy (Bolino et al., 2008; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Tata & Prasad, 2015), it remains uncharted in the taxonomy developed in this study (i.e. the findings exhibit no equivalent of these two existing organisational impressions). Plausible reasons for avoiding being viewed as dangerous are as follows. Firstly, SMEs' reliance upon customer loyalty, due to the lack of leverage in price-setting (Storey & Greene, 2010), determines that they ought to retain positive ties with customers (Deakins & Freel, 2012; Stokes & Wilson, 2006). Projecting an impression of being dangerous may handicap customer loyalty. Secondly, SMEs' perceived impressions are deeply rooted in their relationship with local communities (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017). In this regard, giving an impression of being dangerous presumably damages such relationship and eventually render negative the perceived impressions among the locals (Sen & Cowley, 2013). Finally, as the findings illustrated in *Chapter 7* suggests, SMEs tend to collaborate rather than compete in creative industries so that they can increase visibility by capitalising on each other's follower base on social media (e.g. retweeting each other's promotional tweets). Such findings are verified by the existing literature (Muscio, 2007; Maskell & Malmberg, 1999; Waalkens et al., 2004) as SMEs can benefit from inter-organisational collaborations in a way that they are powered to optimise each other's resources. Thus, SMEs are not motivated to profile themselves as dangerous, fearful, or threatening in front of peers when they seek to foster inter-organisational collaboration, since collaboration with other organisations is pivotal for SMEs' success in knowledge acquisition (e.g. Muscio, 2007), innovation (e.g. Nooteboom, 1994), and growth (e.g. Van Dijk et al., 1997).

Moreover, although SMEs, as suggested in prior literature, attain a high level of dependency on customers (Storey & Greene, 2010; Deakins & Freel, 2012; Stokes &

Wilson, 2006), the findings presented in *Chapter 6* indicate that sample firms prefer to establish mutual respect with, rather than solicit sympathy from stakeholders. Such a phenomenon is best exemplified in ‘favour-rendering’ – one of the subsidiary OIM strategies – by which SMEs tend to depict their help-seeking behaviours as reciprocal for both the helpers and themselves. For instance, although SMEs’ call for volunteers is mainly motivated by the need to mitigate the situation of being short-staffed, they often highlight the benefits for the volunteers in their recruitment posts (see *Section 6.4.1.4* for details). Also, SMEs’ reluctance of being perceived as needy probably results from the fact that reciprocity helps to sustain the business operations of SMEs (e.g. recruit volunteers from local communities) (Van de Ven & Jeurissen, 2005; Galbreath, 2017). Also, according to the literature (e.g. Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Karam, Sekaja, & Geldenhuys, 2016; Rettie, 2009; Bolino et al., 2008), the ultimate goal for SMEs to enact OIM is reducing their dependency on key constituents. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that SMEs are reluctant to be seen as weak or needy in the eyes of the key constituents. Consequently, it is evident that SMEs are not prone to profile themselves as weak or needy.

To conclude, the present study advances the theorisation of organisational impressions by catering to the specified contexts of the focal phenomena (i.e. SMEs’ reliance on customer loyalty, social ties with local communities, and inter-organisational collaborations, and the core value of creative industries).

### **8.3.2 OIM Strategies**

This section discusses how the findings presented in *Chapter 6*, which are intended to answer **RQ2** (i.e. In order to shape the desired impressions/images online, what OIM strategies do SMEs employ on social media?), are integrated with extant literature. In order to do so, this section compares and contrasts between the taxonomy of OIM

strategies identified in the present study and the one developed by Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo (1999) (i.e. developed in a large firm context). It is ascertained that Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo's (1999) taxonomy is most extensively referenced in OIM literature (Bolino et al., 2008; Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013). Aside from Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris (2016), in which the taxonomy was cited, there is a number of recent publications (i.e. OIM-related papers) drawing upon this taxonomy (e.g. Bolino et al., 2008; Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Perks et al., 2013; Conway, O'Keefe, & Hrasky, 2015; Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015; Tata & Prasad, 2015; Windscheid et al., 2016; Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017; Zaharopoulos & Kwok, 2017) (see **Table 5** for details). Hence, the endurance of this existing taxonomy's academic significance over time can be verified.

Since categorising OIM strategies is able to enrich and advance the current knowledge base (Bolino et al., 2008; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999), the present study has formulated a taxonomy of OIM strategies contextualised with the specified settings of this study (i.e. OIM practised by SMEs in creative industries on social media). Hence, it is of critical importance to compare and contrast between the existing and the identified taxonomies and draw implications from the comparison. **Table 36** and **Table 37** briefly outline both taxonomies as follows:

**Table 36: The Existing Taxonomy of OIM Strategies**

|                             | <b>Direct Strategies</b>    | <b>Indirect Strategies</b> |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>Assertive Strategies</b> | Ingratiation                | Boasting                   |
|                             | Intimidation                | Blaring                    |
|                             | Organisational Promotion    | Burnishing                 |
|                             | Exemplification             | Blasting                   |
|                             | Supplication                |                            |
| <b>Defensive Strategies</b> | Accounts                    | Burying                    |
|                             | Disclaimers                 | Blurring                   |
|                             | Organisational Handicapping | Boosting                   |
|                             | Apologies                   | Belittling                 |
|                             | Restitution                 |                            |
|                             | Pro-Social Behaviours       |                            |

\*Source: Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo (1999) as cited in Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris (2016)

**Table 37: The Identified Taxonomy of OIM Strategies**

| Overarching OIM Strategies        | Sub-Strategies                            |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Qualification-Oriented Strategies | Self-Acknowledgement                      |
|                                   | External Acknowledgement                  |
| Relationship-Oriented Strategies  | Ingratiation (Positivizing Relationships) |
|                                   | Positivity of the Relationship            |

\*Source: Findings presented in *Chapter 6*.

### 8.3.2.1 Contextualised Taxonomy

Several noticeable commonalities and incongruences between the two taxonomies have been spotted. Firstly, it is evident that the identified taxonomy exhibits characteristics that mainly fit the settings of SMEs and social media. Specifically, as unveiled in *Table 37*, the identified taxonomy embodies two major types of OIM strategies, namely, qualification-oriented and relationship-oriented strategies. Firstly, the fact that SMEs are reportedly prone to demonstrating qualifications (i.e. fulfilment of requirements regarding organisational outcomes) is dictated by their deficiency in exerting market power especially when competing against their larger counterparts (Stokes & Wilson, 2006; Storey & Greene, 2010). As suggested by Saridakis et al. (2008), competing on price (i.e. keeping low price) is considered unsuccessful for the long-term survival of SMEs. In this regard, SMEs are pressurised to reinforce the quality of their products/services (Antunes, Quiros, & Justino, 2018; McAdam, 2000). Therefore, it is reasonably pivotal for SMEs to employ strategies that underpin the certified product/service quality (i.e. qualifications).

SMEs' focus on qualifications can also be supported by literature pertaining to legitimacy. It is indicated that if an SME, especially in its start-up stage, attains certain organisational achievements, which are considered as a form of certified quality, it is perceived as legitimate (Fisher et al., 2017; Cohen & Dean, 2005; Tornikoski & Newbert, 2007). More importantly, legitimacy literature also pinpoints the role of



acquiring organisational outcomes certified by other parties, namely, external validation, in effectively validating organisational legitimacy (Kistruck et al., 2015; Marlow & McAdam, 2015; Fisher et al., 2017). In line with this proposition, the finding of ‘external acknowledgement’, as one sub-strategy under the category of ‘qualification-oriented strategies’ also highlights the role of external bodies (e.g. authorities in the given field or professional news outlets) in the process of issuing a certification (e.g. awards or compliments) to the projected impressions. Given what legitimacy literature suggests (Kistruck et al., 2015; Fisher et al., 2017), the identified OIM strategy focusing on qualifications can be recognised as being effective in validating SMEs’ perceived impressions.

Further along the line, the sub-strategy titled ‘underpinning external environment’ (i.e. a strategy enhancing the positively certified features of a firm’s external environment including location, industry, facility, and affiliation) is regarded as a potential solution to what Goffman (1959) refers to as the ‘*self-promoter paradox*’, where self-promotional behaviours are usually enacted alongside ‘*less favouring attributions of arrogance, insecurity, or at least dreariness*’ (Goffman, 1959: p. 243). Following the logic, promotional behaviours can be effectively optimised if they are presented in a more indirect manner (Goffman, 1959). ‘Underpinning external environment’ is believed to exemplify such ‘indirect manner’ by illustrating the positive features of an SME’s external environment including location (e.g. describe Liverpool as the cultural centre of UK), industry (e.g. emphasize the contribution of art sector to the collective society), facility (e.g. highlight the role of facility in creating artworks) and affiliation (e.g. claim its participation in a pro-social organisation), instead of solely addressing the positively certified features of the firm itself. Thus, it is argued that SMEs can benefit from the positively certified qualities of its external environment.

In a similar vein, SMEs' keenness to showcase their social relationships (i.e. relationship-oriented strategies) can be rationalised by their reliance upon sustained relationships with customers (Deakins & Freel, 2012; Stokes & Wilson, 2006), local communities (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017), and inter-organisational collaborations (Muscio, 2007; Maskell & Malmberg, 1999; Waalkens et al., 2004). To be specific, SMEs generically generate little brand value (Storey & Greene, 2010; Shocker et al., 1994; Hatten & Schendel, 1977). Thus, customer loyalty remains a primary priority for SMEs to sustain their long-term survival (Van de Ven & Jeurissen, 2005; Du et al., 2007). In this case, customers tend to have an impact on the provision of products/services by making particular requests and failures to meet customer requirements may endanger customer loyalty and eventually the organisational image perceived by customers (Van de Ven & Jeurissen, 2005; Du et al., 2007).

Further, SMEs' commitment to local communities contributes to the building-up of the trust between them and such trust can gradually positivize the attitudes towards the SMEs (Van de Ven & Jeurissen, 2005; Du et al., 2007; Torres et al., 2012). Moreover, inter-organisational collaboration nurtures strategic alliance, which serves to '*augment strengths, while ameliorating weaknesses*' (Bretherton & Chaston, 2005: p. 278). The strategic alliance features the sharing of explicit capabilities and resources (Bretherton & Chaston, 2005; Hamel & Doz, 1998), which in this study can be observed in SMEs' interaction on social media by sharing, tagging, liking, and subscribing to each other's social media pages, so that the information outreach for each individual SME can be augmented. Overall, the use of 'ingratiation', by which SMEs positivize their relationships with social media audiences, results from SMEs' reliance upon customer loyalty, local communities, and inter-organisational collaborations.

Furthermore, from a legitimacy perspective, maintaining a positive association with other notable actors in a field (e.g. partners, celebrities, and industrial members) can convince other audiences that an SME has obtained evaluative approval and thereby the firm ought to be legitimised (Rindova et al., 2007; Fisher et al., 2017). This also rationalises SMEs' emphasis on the notability of the positively related actors (e.g. celebrities), which is featured by the use of the identified OIM strategy, 'positivity of the relationship'.

Aside from the characteristics of SMEs, certain features of social media also lay the groundwork for the formulation of relationship-oriented strategies identified in the present study. To be specific, prior studies affirm that the functionality of social media permits users to disclose information that is commonly unavailable in alternative ways including social networks (Kane et al., 2014; Boyd & Ellison, 2007) and linkages to certain types of content such as blog posts (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). A related assertion is that such conventionally inaccessible information elicits the generation of social capital (Treem & Leonardi, 2012) and hence the enhancement of their perceived impressions on social media (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). Also, SMEs' keenness to showcase their social connections can be materialised by means of retweeting, sharing each other's posts, 'liking' each other's homepages, tagging photos, etc (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013). It is worth noting that the multi-layered means is exclusively facilitated by social media (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013). Meanwhile, it is affirmed in literature that strategic deployment of OIM, if facilitated by social media, is able to enhance the word of mouth effect (i.e. information exchange through interpersonal communication (Dellarocas, 2006)) and attitudinal loyalty of social media followers (i.e. a user's commitment towards a company (Benthaus, Risius, & Beck, 2016; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001)). Word of

mouth effect is enhanced because 1) the functionality of social media reinforces users' ability to connect with each other (i.e. increase the volume of their social networks) (Libai et al., 2013); and 2) enables organisations to control user-generated content (i.e. to manage the tonality of content such as displaying positive comments and deleting negative comments) (Trusov et al., 2009). Attitudinal loyalty is enhanced because shared information circulates rapidly on social media and loyal users (i.e. social media followers) are more committed to sharing information pertaining to the company (Clark & Melancon, 2013). In this regard, social media indeed fuels SMEs' OIM enactment as it strengthens word of mouth effect and loyalty of users during the course of displaying social networks (i.e. relationship-oriented strategies) (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Clark and Melancon, 2013).

### **8.3.2.2 Assertive and Positivity-Laden Taxonomy**

It is clearly unveiled in *Table 36* and *37* that the bulk of the identified OIM strategies are assertive in nature, whereas half of the existing taxonomy consists of strategies that are intrinsically defensive (i.e. direct & defensive strategies and indirect & defensive strategies). Here, being assertive heralds organisations' intent of taking the initiative to boost their images, whilst being defensive indicates organisations' inclination of responding to predicament by mitigating damage to, or restoring their images (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Bolino et al., 2008; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Schlenker, 1980). According to the taxonomy developed in the present study (i.e. *Table 37*), SMEs prefer to employ assertive OIM strategies rather than defensive OIM strategies. Since the common characteristic of assertive OIM strategies is to highlight or enhance the positive features of the organisation itself or a related third party (e.g. a partner) (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016;

Bolino et al., 2008; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999), OIM with the settings of SMEs on social media is largely positivity-laden. To be specific, given the findings presented in **Chapter 6**, qualification-oriented strategies are normally used to demonstrate positive features of an SME that are qualified by 1) the SME itself; or 2) external parties (e.g. newspapers), whilst relationship-oriented strategies are normally used to demonstrate positive features of an SME's social relationships including their efforts to 1) make positive the relationship with key audiences (i.e. ingratiation); and 2) make sense of how positive the relationship is (i.e. positivity of the relationship). Such a phenomenon can be rationalised by SMEs' reliance on, as discussed in **Section 8.3.1.4**, customer loyalty (Deakins & Freel, 2012; Stokes & Wilson, 2006), social ties with local communities (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017), and inter-organisational collaborations (Muscio, 2007; Maskell & Malmberg, 1999; Waalkens et al., 2004). Therefore, SMEs are not motivated in most cases to employ negative-laden strategies such as intimidation and supplication, which can be commonly observed in the context of large corporations (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2007; Bolino et al., 2008).

Although the bulk of OIM strategies identified with SMEs settings are positivity-laden, there are two exceptions. One of them is 'apology' (i.e. a subsidiary form of 'self-presentation' under the category of 'ingratiation'; see **Table 27** for details). The other is titled as 'nonresponse' (i.e. a subsidiary form of 'opinion-conformity' under the category of 'ingratiation'). The findings indicate that 'apology', which is often used by an SME to compensate for unanticipated incidents such as cancellation of shows, and 'nonresponse', through which SMEs cease to respond to unpleasant or abusive comments following unanticipated incidents, are intrinsically reactive and defensive. In these two cases, 'unanticipated incidents' might elicit disappointment

and dissatisfaction among those affected and hence threaten the firm's perceived impressions (Diers-Lawson & Pang, 2016; Bolino et al., 2008; Ogden & Clarke, 2005). Thus, 'apology' is obligated to mitigate the negativity of unexpected underperformance, whereas 'nonresponse' to avoid further escalation of the negativity. Evidently, these two 'anomalies' are contrived for tackling contingencies (i.e. unexpected incidents). Since SMEs always strive to maintain positive connections with the aforementioned stakeholders, namely, customers (Deakins & Freel, 2012), local residents (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017), and partners (Muscio, 2007), and they will not risk damaging the relationships due to their less tolerance of adverse conditions, compared with large corporations (Bamiatzi & Kirchmaier, 2014), it is probably less likely for them to self-initiate image-damaging controversies, in which case the defensive OIM strategies are required. This may be one of the reasons why 'apology' and 'nonresponse' remain marginal in the identified taxonomy. Also, since social media enables SMEs to rehearse beforehand and reprocess afterwards the communication with their audiences (Wang, Pauleen, & Zhang, 2016) and gather customer feedback with ease (Dong & Wu, 2015; Parent et al., 2011), the occurrence of negative incidents can be mitigated. Finally, since this study has no particular focus on how SMEs restore their organisational images following controversial incidents, the identified OIM strategies mostly pertain to SMEs' daily operations, in which image-damaging incidents rarely occur. Therefore, the bulk of the identified OIM strategies are assertive and positivity-laden.

#### **8.3.2.3 Flexible and Versatile Taxonomy**

It is argued that the linkage between organisational impressions and OIM strategies identified in the present study permits more flexibility than that in prior literature. To be specific, in the existing taxonomy, a particular OIM strategy is contrived in order

to project a certain impression (Bolino et al., 2008; Jones & Pittman, 1985; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). To further illustrate the point, the association between organisational impressions and OIM strategies in the existing taxonomy is presented below:

***Table 38: Association between Organisational Impressions and OIM Strategies in the Existing Taxonomy\****

| Organisational Impressions (A) | OIM Strategies (B)            | Association  |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Competence (A1)                | Organisational Promotion (B1) | The implementation of <b>B1</b> , <b>B2</b> , <b>B3</b> , <b>B4</b> , and <b>B5</b> can only elicit the impression of <b>A1</b> , <b>A2</b> , <b>A3</b> , <b>A4</b> , and <b>A5</b> respectively |
| Dangerousness (A2)             | Intimidation (B2)             |  |
| Likeability (A3)               | Ingratiation (B3)             |  |
| Moral Worthiness (A4)          | Exemplification (B4)          |  |
| Neediness (A5)                 | Supplication (B5)             |  |

\*Source: Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo (1999) as cited in Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris (2016)

Given what is outlined in **Table 38**, the association is unwavering as the particular strategy cannot be employed to project alternative impressions. In contrast, according to the findings presented in **Chapter 6**, the association in the identified taxonomy is deemed more flexible and versatile as one particular strategy can be used to project different impressions. In other words, either of the two overarching OIM strategies identified in the present study can be used to project any of the four identified organisational impressions. Evidence is offered in **Table 39** below:

**Table 39: Association between Organisational Impressions and OIM Strategies in the Identified Taxonomy**

|                            |                 | OIM strategies*  |   |
|----------------------------|-----------------|--|---|
|                            |                 | Qualification-Oriented Strategies  | Relationship-Oriented Strategies  |
| Organisational Impressions | Professionalism | <p>'...extraordinary work by extraordinary emerging artists' (19/03/2017) (C1);</p> <p>'Everyone enjoying the brilliant musical entertainment at [a festival hosted by C2]...' (03/08/2016) (C2);</p> <p>'Our [C3's youth-led programme] are super excited for the next one in a week!' (07/07/2016) (C3);</p> <p>'Very excited to be shortlisted for [a well-known digital marketing campaign] – Best Digital Marketing Campaign...' (21/12/2016) (C4);</p> <p>'Catch this amazing documentary this evening at [C5]!' (19/04/2017) (C5);</p> <p>'Our latest exhibition [C6's exhibition] has made it on to [an art-related media] weekly top exhibition list...' (07/12/2016) (C6);</p> <p>'You can see this 'immersive, engrossing and thrilling' production here at [C7]...' (05/03/2017) (C7);</p> <p>'Full house enjoying Beethoven 6,7 and 8!' (22/09/2016) (C8)</p> | <p>'As the 2016 Artists Emerge, another [C1] star, [an artist trained by C1], talks about his own time at [C1], and where the experience has taken him.' (21/11/2016) (C1);</p> <p>'Great to be a part of [a local art event]' (22/09/2016) (C2);</p> <p>'We're really excited to be hosting [C3's production] In [a theatre venue] as part of [a theatre-related organisation]' (26/07/2016) (C3);</p> <p>'Great to meet some of Japan's leading arts and culture managers and tell them about our work in Liverpool and beyond.' (20/01/2017) (C4);</p> <p>'Exciting announcements from our friends [C5's partner], Including the winners of our partnership [the collaborated commission]!' (20/04/2017) (C5);</p> <p>'Did you know that [a renowned artist] and [C6] go back 30 years, to when he exhibited in [C6's venue]...' (20/12/2016) (C6);</p> <p>'[C7's production]', our co-production with [a well-known theatre], opens next week! Here are some of the fabulous production photos...' (21/04/2017) (C7);</p> <p>'We're excited to be part of [a renowned art festival]...' (20/09/2016) (C8)</p> |
|                            | Creativity      | <p>'Fancy trying Comedy in unusual places? [C1's programme]'s waiting to hear from you' (23/03/2017) (C1);</p> <p>'Don't miss the brilliant [a renowned creative artist] in [the artist's project]' at [C2's venue] Sun 5th June' (03/06/2016) (C2);</p> <p>'A brilliant mix of music, film, humour and politics' @[C3's creative production]...' (23/07/2016) (C3);</p> <p>'Art all year round... here's to an inspirational 2017 full of curiosity, discovery and new experiences!' attached below a collaged picture of C4's artworks (01/01/2017) (C4);</p> <p>'RT [ @media A] and [ @media B] presenting in [an art-related event] on the impact of new technologies in the arts &amp; the example of [C5]...' (15/03/2017) (C5);</p>   | <p>'It was awesome to visit <a href="#">Liverpool Hope Creative Campus</a> and meet the 3rd year drama students this morning. Hopefully we'll meet again!' (28/02/2017) (C1);</p> <p>'Exciting day as we launch '[C2's project]' a Community Arts Project, with our Project partners [partners known for creativity]' (19/09/2016) (C2);</p> <p>'[An creative artist] creating positive...performance more at [a creative art event hosted by C3]' (11/07/2016) (C3);</p> <p>'Meanwhile in India... We meet young artists [creative Indian artists]'s inspiring new programme...' (22/11/2016) (C4);</p>  |



|  |                       |  |   |
|--|-----------------------|--|---|
|  |                       | <p><i>'Find our science fiction inspired exhibition trolley out in our gallery everyday - build your own Mars Rover and dig for old artefacts!'</i> (18/12/2016) (C6);</p> <p><i>'Why not try something new at our [C7's creative production] tonight...'</i> (07/03/2017) (C7);</p> <p><i>'PHOTO GALLERY: the best of [C8's programme of creative music making] at [a renowned TV show] via @[a renowned media outlet]...'</i> (30/08/2016) (C8)</p>  | <p><i>'Great to hear about The 3D Additivist Cookbook from [C1's partners] yesterday...'</i> (27/04/2017) (C5);</p> <p><i>'Join us tomorrow for some experimental improvisation with [a creative organisation], listen to an extract of them performing...'</i> (14/12/2016) (C6);</p> <p><i>'Our Artistic Assistant spoke to the brilliant [an actor who is known for her role as the creative director of an art-based company] about her new adaptation of a Brontë masterpiece!'</i> (20/03/2017) (C7);</p> <p><i>'RT...Classic 'lost' songwriter @[a renowned songwriter known for his creativity in composing], to play @[C8] this October...'</i> (27/07/2016) (C8)</p>  |
|  | Social Responsibility | <p><i>'[C1's youth-led programme]...provides participants with the opportunity...offering support at the onset of their careers...'</i> (31/10/2016) (C1);</p> <p><i>'[C2's child-led programme] sessions in [C2's venue]'</i> attached below a video of baby participants (21/11/2016) (C2);</p> <p><i>'Theatre that motivates people into action, more on [C3's production themed around the issue of homelessness]'</i> (15/07/2016) (C3);</p> <p><i>'NEWS: [C4's artwork] raised £1,224...for vital work with asylum seekers and refugees'</i> (09/12/2016) (C4);</p> <p><i>'Be inspired by doc film, [C5's production], &amp; continue to fight LGBT persecution today...'</i> (18/04/2017) (C5);</p> <p><i>'Looking for Christmas cards with a difference? Pick up some from [C6's pro-social programme], our group of learning disabled artists...'</i> (12/12/2016) (C6);</p> <p><i>'Opening tonight, [C7's production] openly discusses the struggles some couples face when they try to have a child. Through this production, we hope to encourage constructive conversations about the difficulties of pursuing parenthood...'</i> (23/02/2017) (C7);</p> <p><i>'A week of exciting visits! Today [C8's musician] visited @[a pro-social organisation] and performed for (and with!) the Year 3s via @[youth participants of C8's youth-led training programme]'</i> (28/09/2016) (C8)</p> | <p><i>'Our [C1's programme] are so awesome that have donated the ticket takings from their last show, [a show created by C1's programme]', to [a local charity]'</i> (12/12/2016) (C1);</p> <p><i>'@[C2's partner dedicated to improve the wellbeing of the local community] good to see you supporting [a local art event] in your twitter feed. It would be great to see you our studios!'</i> (28/09/2016) (C2);</p> <p><i>'#[C3's production] Keynote [an politician] debates tactics 4 social change...info @[C3's programme]'</i> (17/07/2016) (C3);</p> <p><i>'Loved seeing inside this [a partner's artwork], where artist [an artist promoting the local community] recently hosted a banquet for the local community'</i> (16/12/2016) (C4);</p> <p><i>'Join us tmrw for a doc about the AIDS activist movement &amp; discussion with @[C5's partners]...'</i> (18/04/2017) (C5);</p> <p><i>'[C6's building] glows orange in support of the UN campaign against domestic violence @[the aforementioned campaign]'</i> (10/12/2016) (C6);</p> <p><i>'Today is the day [an athlete] runs [a sport] for our work here at [C7]. He has already smashed his original target of raising £750...'</i> (22/04/2017) (C7);</p> |

|  |                |   |   |
|--|----------------|---|---|
|  |                |   | <p><i>'GALLERY: Enjoying schools concerts, Music matters! @[schools in collaboration with C8]...' (24/06/2016) (C8)</i></p>   |
|  | Attractiveness | <p><i>'Immersive Theatrical Game devised by [C1's programm2]...' (08/09/2016) (C1);</i><br/> <i>'Our new installation – babies overboard! has been a splashing success...' (12/10/2016) (C2);</i><br/> <i>'Fancy getting into drama? Our [C3's programme] is free &amp; there's no audition!' (09/07/2016) (C3);</i><br/> <i>'Planning for [an art festival hosted by C4] starts NOW' attached below a photo of C4's workplace (11/11/2016) (C4);</i><br/> <i>'It's #ukcoffeeweek! The perfect excuse to grab a little caffeine &amp; cake in The Garden Cafe at [C5]' (10/04/2017) (C5);</i><br/> <i>'Our galleries are open today, showing free exhibitions including an immersive video installation...' (27/12/2016) (C6);</i><br/> <i>'Let's all take a moment to have our hearts melted by Tia and Eve, the adorably fluffy companions of [C7's production]...' (17/03/2017) (C7);</i><br/> <i>'RT...Lovely pics of last wks Flowerful Fusion @[C8] FB page...' (02/08/2016) (C8)</i></p> | <p><i>'Thanks for passing it on! @ [C1's partner]' (19/03/2017) (C1);</i><br/> <i>'We love seeing photos taken by others! Thank you for sharing and we're so glad you enjoyed it!' attached below photos taken by others, showing C2's facility (01/08/2016) (C2);</i><br/> <i>'Well done everyone involved in our theatre facilitation course for achieving your @[an award for art] Its been a great week' (01/07/2016) (C3);</i><br/> <i>'Our amazing new neighbours [C4's new neighbouring companies] – welcome to [C4's building]!' (29/01/2017) (C4);</i><br/> <i>'Visit [C5's facility] of our exhibition, [C5's exhibition], &amp; check out [partners' work based in C5's facility] by @[C5's partners]...' (02/04/2017) (C5);</i><br/> <i>'We're wishing all our visitors and online followers a happy Christmas eve today...' (24/12/2016) (C6);</i><br/> <i>'We have had such a brilliant journey with this story, with the cast and the creatives - we hope that you enjoyed it too!' (22/04/2017) (C7);</i><br/> <i>'Morning! We're experiencing some technical difficulties today so our phones are down until further notice. Apologies.' (06/09/2016) (C8)</i></p> |

\*Examples are given to illustrate that both qualification-oriented and relationship-oriented strategies can be used to project all four identified organisational impressions in practice.

In the existing taxonomy, the defining characteristics of each OIM strategy is centred upon the particular attribution which an organisation strives to project (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016), meaning that OIM strategies are dictated by the projected organisational attributions (i.e. organisational attributions elicit corresponding organisational impressions). Nonetheless, as indicated in **Table 39**, a certain organisational impression can be legitimised through either showcasing relevant qualifications or relationships. Thus, given the findings of the present study, the projection of a certain impression depends on what a firm is able to offer, be it a qualified or a relational attribution. It is also argued, provided the inner logic of the taxonomy, that any impression, other than the identified four (i.e. professionalism, creativity, social responsibility, and attractiveness), can be potentially attained and legitimised through these two main sets of OIM strategies. Overall, such a flexible and versatile taxonomy is expected to be eligible for SMEs. To be specific, SME managers are often obligated to undertake a wide range of tasks, both operational and strategic (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017). Meanwhile, they are often faced with a dearth of functional knowhow and expertise (Halme & Korpela, 2014; López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017; Packham et al., 2005). Under this premise, the taxonomy with greater flexibility might be suitable in achieving multiple goals – simply adding the ‘right ingredients’ (i.e. elements/attribution related to the projected impression) to the taxonomy. Following this logic, it is evident that the identified taxonomy of OIM strategies is versatile to fit the context of SMEs.

To conclude, this present study extends the existing knowledge regarding the categorisation of OIM strategies by identifying a taxonomy that is 1) contextualised within the settings of SMEs and social media; 2) assertive and positivity-laden, and 3) flexible and versatile, when compared with the existing taxonomy (Mohamed,

Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999 as cited in Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016), which was developed in a large firm context and remains most extensively adopted in prior literature (Bolino et al., 2008; Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013). It is evident in the preceding discussion that the key features of the identified taxonomy are shaped by the specified context, that is, OIM practised by SMEs on social media.

### 8.3.3 Organisational Qualities Affecting OIM Practice

This section integrates the findings presented in *Chapter 7*, which is intended to answer **RQ3** (i.e. what organisational qualities have affected SMEs' OIM practice on social media?) with existing literature. In order to 1) make explicit how they relate to the multi-layered organisational features of SMEs; and 2) help readers to gain a refined understanding of the findings presented in *Chapter 7*, the identified organisational qualities, deriving from Lampadari's (2017: p. 52) SMEs success factors framework, are categorised into three classes: individual quality, enterprise qualities, and business environment qualities. The categorisation is outlined in *Table 9.3.3* as follows:

**Table 40: Categorisation of Organisational Qualities Affecting SMEs' OIM Practice on Social Media**

| Category  | Organisational Qualities Affecting OIM* | Description  | Examples   |
|---|---|--|--|
| Individual (qualities relating to the social media practitioner)      | Nature of Practitioner                  | Practitioners' experience gained from early life, occupational background regarding trainings received, and personal habits for socialising online | <b>Early experience:</b> 'I think because we are in a business of being playful [referring to her early career as an actress]. So, you have to reflect that at all levels...allowing our personalities to flow onto the company as well...' (C1); <b>Occupational background:</b> 'I used it personally and I did an internship at the national theatre in London, and I ran the social media accounts for a bit, so I've done it professionally and personally' (C3); '...came up and gave us a day's kind of workshop, just sharing his knowledge, which is really, really useful' (C8) <b>Personal habits:</b> '...Seeing how people react and seeing how different posts work, what makes people talk, really excites me' (C7) |
| Enterprise (qualities relating to the internal structure of the firm) | Division of Roles and Responsibilities  | How the role and responsibility of each member of a team in managing social media accounts on behalf of their SMEs are defined                     | <b>Cooperative:</b> 'I look after the marketing and communications team...he [referring to the other team member] kind of puts out the posts on social media' (C5); <b>Democratic:</b> 'we'll sit down as a team, and we'll say that these are kind of the ones we want to use on flyers, these are the ones for online...' (C7); <b>Ambiguous:</b> 'we all have the loggings, so we can all do [social media management]' (C1)  |

|   |                               |   |  |
|---|-------------------------------|---|--|
|   | Work Routine                  | Customary course of procedures to manage SMEs' social media postings on a daily basis                                     | <b>Planning, execution, and improvisation:</b> 'Starting at the beginning, we have a social media planner...it's day by day...we try to put as many of the messages in as possible in advance so that...we aim to work about a week or two ahead...that's the first stage just populating that planner...The next stage is we use a social media planning tool called Hootsuite, and that just allows us to schedule things in advance... On a daily basis, we are involved in the more live side of it – the interaction, so, retweeting people, responding to messages, answering queries...(C6);<br><b>Flexibility:</b> 'I have Twitter on my phone, so I kind of do that all the time anyway for the company... I check out to see if there's any news stories, or anything happening globally that is relevant to any of our programmes at the moment' (C3) |
|   | Work Principle                | Guidelines for SMEs' social media management  | <b>Engaging (with target audience):</b> 'I need it to be constantly active, constantly engaging people' (C2); '[referring to the tone of voice on social media] just appear a bit playful and friendly rather than static and institutional' (C4); 'we want people to feel welcome' (C7)<br><b>Relevant (to target audience):</b> 'we aim to post things that we think are really relevant to our audience' (C6); 'It has to be family-oriented' (C2)  |
|   | Evaluation System             | System deployed to gauge the efficacy of SMEs' social media management  | <b>Evaluation of audience preference:</b> 'if you've got a good image and a nice sentence that goes with it, it works really well on Instagram' (C5);<br><b>Evaluation of audience demographics:</b> 'Twitter allows us to do more of the messages that perhaps are for our art specialist audience like residencies and specific news about artists' (C6)<br><b>Trial and error approach:</b> 'some of the images we posted haven't got as much engagement as we would set out to achieve, so we would adjust our strategy in response to this' (C4)  |
| Business Environment (qualities external to the firm) | Nature of Industry            | Inherent features to characterise SMEs including attributes of creative industries and connections with local communities | <b>Collaborative (rather than competing):</b> 'we don't feel that we are kind of competing...because most exhibitions run for a period of months, there's no reason why a person won't come to [company A]'s exhibition and our exhibition and [company B]'s exhibition...they can come to all of them (C6);<br>'We all work really closely together...because we all want to bring people here to experience the art and this extends to social media, where we tend to promote each other's messages, and we help each other out' (C4);<br>'We link up with lots of councillors on Twitter' (C3)<br><b>Connecting with local community:</b> 'we invite them to come and comment, to review, you know, to tag, to share...' (C2)  |
|   | Functionality of Social media | Features pertaining to the functionality of social media  | <b>Built-in function:</b> 'the other thing that I really like on Facebook in terms of advertising is to target look-alike audiences' (C8);<br><b>Social media analytics:</b> 'our posts were quite sporadic... now we are posting kind of everyday and it's got much more focus on the exhibitions or things that are going on the building rather than kind of random [C5]-related things' (C5)   |

\*Source: Lampadarios (2017) and findings presented in **Chapter 7**.

In **Chapter 7**, the identified organisational qualities are pivotal to SMEs' social media management and hence they are believed to pose an influence on SMEs' OIM practice on social media, since strategized management of a firm's social media activities has a positive effect on the organisational impressions perceived by social media audiences (Benthaus, Risius, & Beck, 2016; Miller and Tucker, 2013). Failing to embark on social media engagement can inflict damage on companies' public

perceptions (Culnan et al., 2010; Benthous, Risius, & Beck, 2016). Also, it is widely acknowledged that OIM strategies are implemented or conveyed through social media management (e.g. Aral et al., 2013; Schniederjans et al., 2013; Benthous, Risius, & Beck, 2016). In this regard, the identified organisational qualities are regarded to exert an impact on SMEs' OIM practice on social media. Additionally, such an influence over OIM within the specified settings are further interpreted by relating them to the key propositions initially articulated by Goffman (1959) and further developed by recent publications such as Rettie (2009), Solomon et al. (2013), and Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland (2016). It needs to be stressed that Goffman's (1959) conceptualisation of IM (i.e. the antecedent of OIM) has been extensively considered as the theoretical foundation of many recent papers in exploring OIM in various areas (e.g. Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2011; Solomon et al., 2013; Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014; Benthous, 2014; Tata & Prasad, 2015; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016; Benthous, Risius, & Beck, 2016; Zaharopoulos & Kwok, 2017; Bullock, 2018). Thus, the academic significance of Goffman's (1959) work endures over time.

The identified organisational qualities serve to extend three key concepts initially proposed by Goffman (1959) (i.e. as cited in Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016): 1) team performance for practising OIM, 2) Frontstage and backstage analogy, and 3) social cues in mediated communications. These three concepts are pivotal to OIM in the specified settings as 1) the notion of team performance illuminates how practitioners cooperate, as a collective, to perpetuate desired organisational impressions (McDonnell & King, 2013; Goffman, 1959); 2) frontstage and backstage analogy, deriving from the metaphor where OIM is depicted as actors making crafted performance in front of audiences (Goffman, 1959; Solomon et al., 2013; Benthous,

Risius, & Beck, 2016), is formulated to expound how OIM strategies are devised (i.e. prepared at backstage) and implemented (i.e. delivered at frontstage) (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Goffman, 1959); and 3) the notion of social cues embedded in mediated communications (i.e. between SMEs and their social media audiences) offers explanations to how OIM is facilitated by the functionality of technology (i.e. social media in this case) (Rettie, 2009; Goffman, 1959; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). Overall, these three concepts will be elaborated in relation to the identified organisational qualities in the following sections.

#### **8.3.3.1 Individual Quality**

As indicated in *Chapter 7*, the nature of practitioner incorporating their prior experience, occupational background, and personal habits have been found to exert an impact on the way they run social media accounts on behalf of their employers. Such an impact can be typified by the personalised style embedded in the use of their firms' social media accounts. For instance, **C7**'s practitioner admitted that the way she ran the firm accounts emulated that of her own accounts (i.e. '*...that I look through personally, is connecting with friends, sharing with friends, and I feel like that's what [C7] is doing...*' (**C7**)). This finding is in line with the notion that SMEs often adopt a comparatively more personalised style in engaging with their social media audiences, as indicated in existing literature (e.g. Rauniar et al., 2014).

Although obtaining certain form of persona by adopting a relatively more casual tone of voice, and unfolding personal details might help foster the impression of being trustworthy (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Koch et al., 2012), this tends to informalise practitioners' professional use of social media and consequently inflict damage to the overall impression of the represented company (Goffman, 1959; Wang et al., 2011; Westphal et al., 2012; McDonnell & King, 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, &

Coupland, 2016). To be specific, in Goffman's (1959) initial conceptualisation of IM, team performance signals the collective endeavours made by individuals, namely, members of a team (i.e. social media practitioners in this case), in perpetuating particular impressions (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). Although each member of a team is highly regarded as contributory to the overall impression being conveyed, it is concentrated particularly upon the potential misconducts of individuals, namely, the unconscious breach of the shared conventions of the situation, which might hinder the projection of the overall impressions (McDonnell & King, 2013; Westphal et al., 2012). This situation applies to social media where team members allegedly are not immune to '*compromising the strategic presentations of their organisations*' (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016: p. 599). Such 'compromising' is particularly illustrated by the blurring of the boundaries between a team member's personal and professional use of social media (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). It is acclaimed that the blurring of the boundaries might result in practitioners unconsciously transplanting a style that pervades their personal accounts to their professional accounts (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). Despite the benefits to the blurring (e.g. the less institutionalised tone of voice might make the organisations be perceived as trustworthy), organisations are more vulnerable to leaking improper details (e.g. offensive language) that might elicit an image-damaging repercussion among the public (Wang et al., 2011; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016).

The adversity of the aforementioned 'blurring' embedded in team performance might be aggravated in the context of SMEs. It is firstly attested by the findings presented in **Chapter 7** that the blurring of the boundaries between personal and professional accounts is present in SMEs. For instance, **C1's** practitioner admitted that her



professional use of social media was ‘*inter-linked*’ with her personal use of social media. Such blurring is intensified mainly due to the dearth of technical expertise in place to optimise OIM performance on social media (Stockdale et al., 2012; Zeiller & Schauer, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). For instance, in line with this assertion, it is found that practitioners representing **C1** and **C2** do not have relevant education background or work experience gained from earlier career in terms of managing public-facing materials to engage with social media audiences (see **Section 7.3.2** for details). Also, provision of formal training is less present in SMEs than in large firms (Cosh et al., 2005; Carroll et al., 1999; Storey, 2005). This is also affirmed by the finding that the bulk of the interviewed practitioners claimed that their way of managing social media accounts on behalf of their firms was largely dependent upon intuition and experimentation (e.g. ‘*knowing how to do social media is all about, is largely about intuition, experimentation, and hands-on approach*’ (**C4**)), rather than knowledge gathered from any form of formal training (see **Section 7.3.2** for details). Further, the virality of information diffusion on social media also escalates the risks to a far greater level as inappropriate information circulates rapidly on social media and it is hard to control the spread-out (Peng & Tjosvold, 2011; Vaast & Kaganer, 2013).

In spite of the adversity of the ‘blurring’ underpinned in the existing literature (e.g. Wang et al., 2011; Westphal et al., 2012; McDonnell & King, 2013), this study yields a slightly contrasting finding that such ‘blurring’, if guided properly, can in fact exert a positive impact on the team performance in perpetuating organisational impressions. The finding reveals that maintaining a strong personal interest in observing others plays a key role in capitalising on the ‘blurring’. For instance, **C4**’s practitioner showed a strong interest in regularly (i.e. *I observe that on a daily basis*’ (**C4**))

monitoring the social media activities of other like-minded organisations in search of viable strategic insights that could be applied to her company such as rhetorical styles eligible for emulation (see *Section 7.3.2* for details). Such self-initiated monitoring and accumulation of knowledge was carried out in her leisure time, using her own personal social media account (i.e. it was purely her own interest rather than part of her duty). Such self-learning behaviours are pivotal to SMEs, since SMEs' lack of technical expertise (Stockdale et al., 2012; Zeiller & Schauer, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Packham et al., 2005) and capacity to provide formal training for their staff (Ahmad et al., 2017; Zeiller & Schauer, 2011; Cosh et al., 2005; Carroll et al., 1999; Storey, 2005), can be mitigated. Since **C4**'s practitioner subscribed to the homepages of those like-minded organisations, using her personal social media accounts, the updates of those organisations she attempted to monitor would appear on her personal newsfeed. Thus, she could immediately spot any activity that intrigued her, when she was browsing her own social networks in leisure time. Such a type of 'blurring' of the boundaries between personal and professional use of social media facilitates self-learning to gain knowledge pertaining to managing social media activities for projecting desired impressions. Hence, the 'blurring', guided by the strong personal interest in monitoring and emulating other organisations' social media activities, is expected to be a viable tactic to cultivate expertise and compensate for the deficit of formal training for SMEs (Ahmad et al., 2017; Zeiller & Schauer, 2011; Stockdale et al., 2012).

### **8.3.3.2 Enterprise Qualities**

As indicated in *Chapter 7*, enterprise qualities including 'division of roles and responsibilities', 'work routine', and 'work principle' have been found to deter the adversity of the blurring of the boundaries between practitioners' professional and

personal use of social media. Firstly, having clearly defined roles and responsibilities warrants that each team member only has a restricted jurisdiction. In other words, each member only undertakes work assigned to him/her or work in which he/she specialises. In doing so, they are unlikely to be exposed to unfamiliar tasks and hence the occurrence of unforced errors is reduced. For instance, **C4**'s practitioner took charge of planning, monitoring, and decision making whilst the rest of the team are solely committed to creating content for social media postings (see *Section 7.3.3* for details).

Also, having clearly mapped out managerial routines can help coordinate each team member's duty and hence ensures such duty is fulfilled accordingly. For instance, **C6** deployed a clearly defined workflow with regard to managing social media posting on a daily basis (see *Section 7.3.4* for details).

Finally, following strictly pre-agreed work principles further frames each team member's behaviours and hence serves to prevent potential misconducts. For instance, some of the sample firms only publicize content that is closely related to what they do (see *Section 7.3.5* for details), so that the message conveyed through social media postings is not discursive or sporadic. Overall, in the cases which exhibit these three organisational qualities (e.g. **C6**), social media postings are carefully planned, constructed, and scrutinised. In other words, an individual is allowed limited autonomy for 'improvisation' that goes beyond the pre-determined frame.

Further, these three qualities are in line with, as suggested by prior literature (Pilkington, 2013), the disciplining of staff in order to eschew the abusive use of social media including the use of inappropriate language, emotional outbursts, and the posting of offensive materials (Wang et al., 2011), which ultimately handicaps the

overall organisational impressions (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). Therefore, these three qualities can be understood as the disciplinary mechanisms, which collectively serve to reduce the likelihood of the aforementioned ‘blurring’ by only permitting the publication of social media content that contributes to the building-up of the collective organisational impressions pre-agreed on by the team as a whole.

Since the aforementioned ‘blurring’ has tangible advantages such as nurturing the impression of being trustworthy (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Koch et al., 2012) and practitioners’ self-learning behaviours discussed in *Section 8.3.3.1*, in conjunction with the fact that disciplinary mechanisms can be adopted to mitigate the adversity of the ‘blurring’ (as discussed above), it becomes critical, especially for SMEs (Rauniar et al., 2014), to embed a regulated persona in their social media postings. Here, a persona refers to the personalised style adhered to SMEs’ social media postings, in order to eschew being viewed as institutionalised (e.g. *‘just appear a bit playful and friendly rather than static and institutional’* (C4)), which is more often seen in large corporations’ social media postings (Rauniar et al., 2014; Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014). Meanwhile, the persona must be regulated and confined by the consensus of the whole team through the identified disciplinary mechanisms, in which case, the benefits of the ‘blurring’ can be capitalised on, whilst its adversity mitigated.

In addition, the identified disciplinary mechanisms also contribute to distinguishing between what Goffman (1959) conceptualises, ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’. To be specific, ‘frontstage and backstage analogy’ is a metaphor extensively used to depict how OIM is constructed and performed (Solomon et al., 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016). According to the analogy, teams (i.e. social media practitioners on behalf of SMEs in this study), with

the purpose of manipulating what could be accessed and observed by the public (i.e. social media audiences in this study), tend to split their environment into two areas, namely, ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ (Solomon et al., 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Goffman, 1959). The former is the area where they deliver performances and hence they are constantly being viewed and scrutinised by their audiences, whereas the latter is the area where the performances are created, prepared, and polished and teams are not on view to the public (Vieira de Cuhna, 2013; Raghuram, 2013; Solomon et al., 2013; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016). Overall, this indicates that the appearance and behaviours of a team were premediated before being revealed at frontstage and this ultimately contributes to the overall impression being conveyed (Giacalone & Rosefel, 1990; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). Here, ‘premediated’ even signifies the team’s behaviour of ‘rehearsing’ multiple anticipated scenarios in order to generate a ‘script’ beforehand for all team members to follow if they are faced with the rehearsed situations (Goffman, 1959; Raghuram, 2013). Also, it is argued that at backstage, where the teams are no longer visible to the public, their performances are ‘*less contrived*’ and ‘*more spontaneous*’ and such status is what typifies the whole backstage area (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016: p. 599). Overall, it is crucial to draw a clear line between backstage and frontstage so that information that is publicised at frontstage can be well contrived and framed to elicit desired organisational impressions, whilst information that is concealed at backstage remains inaccessible to target audiences and thereby causes no damage to the projected impressions (Goffman, 1959; Raghuram, 2013; Solomon et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, the existing literature suggests that some features of SMEs presumably obscure the boundary between frontstage and backstage and hence pose a threat to

SMEs' publically perceived images. Firstly, it has been affirmed in the existing literature that the decision-making process, in general, is rather simplistic in SMEs since owner-managers retain an overwhelming authority in making strategic decisions (Mazzarole, 2014; Cosh et al., 2005; Curran & Blackburn, 2001), and hence such authority extends to social media management (Ahmad et al., 2017; Boyles, 2011; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). Coupled with the fact that owner-managers usually lack relevant knowhow in terms of strategizing social media management (Halme & Korpela, 2014; López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017; Ahmad et al., 2017; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), SMEs sometimes are faced with the situation where inappropriate information is involuntarily leaked to the public on social media (Scott & Orlikowski, 2014; Leonardi & Barley, 2010). Such situation is typified by the publication of inappropriate social media postings (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016), in which case inappropriate information that is supposed to stay at backstage is mistakenly presented at frontstage (Wang et al., 2011). Consequently, this can inflict repercussions to the promotion of favourable organisational impressions (Wang et al., 2011; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). Some of the sample firms are regarded as vulnerable in this regard. For instance, **C1** retains an authoritarian approach as to how social media postings are constructed. The three co-founders all have access to the company's social media accounts and each one of them can post anything he/she prefers without gaining consent from the other two (see *Section 7.3.3* for details). As a result, SMEs with such an authoritarian decision-making approach are likely to risk mishandling information between backstage and frontstage and eventually causing damage to their organisational impressions (Ahmad et al., 2017; Boyles, 2011; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016).

The identified disciplinary mechanisms including ‘division of roles and responsibilities’, ‘work routine’, and ‘work principle’, are believed to help demarcate between backstage and frontstage in the context of SMEs. To be specific, disciplinary mechanisms are adopted to purposively construct the content of postings before revealing it on social media. For instance, having clearly defined duties for each member of the team ensures that each member works under his/her confined jurisdiction and a consensus is often sought when it comes to strategically managing social media activities. For instance, each team member’s opinion was highly valued in **C7** (see *Section 7.3.3* for details). Also, sticking to pre-determined managerial routines helps to connect each member’s duty and make sure that the duty is carried out as planned. For instance, **C5** maintained a well-articulated routine to pre-schedule social media events (see *Section 7.3.4* for details). Moreover, following established work principles further regulates what should be put on social media. For instance, **C4** ensured that the content of its social media postings must be closely related to contemporary art. These three disciplinary mechanisms jointly contribute to substantialising the meaning of the previously discussed term, ‘premediated’ in frontstage and backstage analogy. Specifically, work principles followed by all team members to regulate social media postings can be understood as the ‘script’ for regulating OIM practice (Raghuram, 2013; Rettie, 2009), whilst the other two disciplinary mechanisms co-form the ‘rehearsal’ (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Solomon et al., 2013) in the backstage area. In doing so, inappropriate information is unlikely to be viewed at frontstage and thus the backstage and frontstage are well separated (Wang et al., 2011; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016).

More importantly, ‘evaluation system’, as elaborated in *Section 7.3.6*, serves to readjust the boundary between ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’. Specifically, once the

information is disclosed on social media, the evaluation system, featuring a trial and error approach based on social media analytics to discern what appeals to target audiences, is adopted to gauge the efficacy of the disclosed information in the frontstage area. In other words, SMEs examine social media analytics to understand how well social media audience engages with the posts by clicking, liking, sharing, and commenting on social media. The feedback (i.e. what kind of posts are effective in engaging with social media followers) produced by such ‘evaluation system’ is reprocessed and corresponding strategic adjustments are made in the backstage area. Therefore, ‘evaluation system’ can be understood as an adjustment mechanism that is intended to regularly adjust and readjust the strategic focus on social media. In doing so, the ‘evaluation system’ works to redefine the boundary between backstage and frontstage by updating the ‘script’ pertaining to what kind of information qualifies for showing at frontstage and what should be withdrawn to backstage (Goffman, 1959; Rettie, 2009; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016), so that potential threats to the projection of desired organisational impressions such as the inappropriate social media posts addressed by Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland (2016) and Wang et al. (2011) can be fended off.

In addition to the fact that it works to redefine the boundary between backstage and frontstage, it is surprising to notice that the ‘evaluation system’ also elicits SMEs’ purposive disclosure of information that is supposed to be concealed in the backstage area. Through the evaluation system, SMEs acknowledge the popularity of ‘behind-the-scene’ (BTS) content among social media audiences (see *Section 7.3.8* for details). Here, BTS content refers to information that was not an integral part in the frontstage performance such as stage installation, show rehearsals, and cast interviews. The current hype of BTS is rooted in sample firms’ pursuit of creativity. On the one hand,



the selected SMEs, being part of the creative industries (e.g. visual art, theatre, puppetry, technology-led art, and performing art), strive to exploit and capitalise on intellectual property through creativity (DCMS, 2001; Nesta, 2017). On the other hand, they are highly motivated to explore niche areas in response to the scarcity of market power and resources (Van Praag & Versloot, 2007; Durand & Coeurderoy, 2001). Thus, the nature of creative industries and SMEs exerts an impact over sample firms' endeavours to offer an unconventional perspective (i.e. a glimpse of backstage) of their products/services for their target audiences, that is, one of the values of BTS content (i.e. it shifts viewers into the role of promoters) (Flightmedia, 2018).

A related, more practical benefit of BTS is that it galvanises social media audiences into deeper engagement with the company such as liking, sharing, and commenting (Flightmedia, 2018; Williams & Chinn, 2010). As a result, BTS content is believed to enhance an SME's ability to build trust and long-term relationships with their social media audiences and eventually render positive the SME's perceived organisational impressions (Williams & Chinn, 2010; Fisher, 2009).

More intriguingly, aside from disclosing what used to be concealed at backstage from a promoter's perspective, some of sample firms have also taken a step further – presenting products/services from a creator's perspective. As indicated by the findings, certain SMEs have experimented their social media presence as in allowing artists to 'take over' their social media accounts. Here, 'takeover' signals that artists, instead of social media practitioners (i.e. promoters), are permitted to create and disseminate content of social media postings on the company accounts. The purpose of such 'takeover', as suggested by the findings, is to further reveal the backstage side of an event, with enriched, first-hand details, from a creator's perspective (i.e. *'they want behind-the-scene insights, we give them behind-the-scene insights, putting the*

*platform in the hands of an artist' (C4)), and thereby further strengthen the company's engagement with its social media audience (Williams & Chinn, 2010; Fisher, 2009).*

Overall, it becomes pivotal to explicitly differentiate between backstage and frontstage. This entails, on the one hand, efforts preventing involuntary disclosure of information (i.e. information accidentally leaked from backstage to frontstage), which might cause damage to an SME's perceived organisational impressions. On the other hand, certain types of behind-the-scene (BTS) content ought to be released from backstage to frontstage in order to deepen an SME's engagement with its social media audience and eventually positize the firm's promoted organisational impressions.

#### **8.3.3.3 Business Environment Qualities**

Finally, business environment qualities are twofold. The first facet is centred upon the industrial nature of the selected SMEs, which tends to foster collaboration instead of competition in the cohort. For instance, **C6** recognised that the nature of its industry, namely, exhibitions of artworks, does not force the target audience to choose one over another (i.e. *'because most exhibitions run for a period of months, there's no reason why a person won't come to [company A]'s exhibition and our exhibition and [company B]'s exhibition...they can come to all of them'* (**C6**)). Also, given the workload required to host a biennial festival of arts, **C4** solicited support from partnering with other companies in the same field (i.e. *'with the main force behind [C4]'s festival, we deliver a lot of these exhibitions with our partners within the city...'* (**C4**)). In this regard, SMEs in such an industry are encouraged to form inter-organisational collaborations (Muscio, 2007; Maskell & Malmberg, 1999; Waalkens et al., 2004) and hence nurture strategic alliance, which aims to *'augment strengths, while ameliorating weaknesses'* (Bretherton & Chaston, 2005: p. 278). Such strategic alliance, featuring the sharing of each other's capabilities and resources (Bretherton &

Chaston, 2005; Hamel & Doz, 1998), is also reflected in the affiliated firms' social media posts as they often seek to connect with each other on social media by means of, for instance, retweeting each other's promotional tweets, so that the outreach of their social media posts can be increased. (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Kane et al., 2014; Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Accordingly, the inter-organisational collaboration facilitated by the nature of the art industry eventually nurtures the relationship-oriented strategies identified in this study.

The other facet is akin to the functionality of social media, which serves to fundamentally consolidate intensified engagement between SMEs and their target audiences. To be specific, the use of social media analytics enables SMEs to have a relatively sophisticated understanding of what appeals to their audiences. For instance, **C7** realised, through analytics provided by Instagram, the growing popularity of behind-the-scene (BTS) imagery and decided to populate the platform with more BTS photos and videos (see **Table 7.3.8** for details). Also, SMEs can also be informed of the demographics of their target audiences by social media analytics. For instance, social media analytics was used by **C5** to facilitate their audience segmentation (i.e. *'we break down our audiences into six different sections' (C5)*), so that its social media posts could be constructed to resonate with all six segments (i.e. *'it's making sure that throughout the whole week, there's something relevant to each of the six categories' (C5)*). In this case, social media analytics refers to a combination of computational metrics that aid the assessment of the audience's interaction with a company's social media postings (Ardley & Brooke, 2014). Typical forms include number of likes, shares, and clicks, all of which are engagement figures functionalised by social media (e.g. Facebook Insights).

This finding further indicates that the use of social media analytics mitigates the relative ineffectiveness of communications mediated by social media between SMEs and their target audiences and hence improves SMEs' OIM practice on social media. Specifically, as initially articulated by Goffman (1959), in non-physical settings, the sense of being facilitated by technology, which in this case refers to social media, is conceptualised as being 'mediated' from a material perspective (Subramaniam et al., 2013; Rettie, 2009), and being 'situation-like' from a sociological point of view (Rettie, 2009; Goffman, 1959; 1979). The former term, 'mediated', underpins the material, or more specifically, technological intervention in communications. Meanwhile, the latter term, 'situation-like', as initially proposed by Goffman (1959) and more recently underpinned by Rettie (2009), depicts the impotency of such technology-intervened communications for establishing a perfect situation that allows a full range of accessible social cues. In other words, these communications reportedly lack certain social cues that are usually accessible through interpersonal encounters (Rettie, 2009; Goffman, 1959; 1979). In this regard, the mediated communications are merely an approximation of the perfect situation as Goffman (1959; 1979) ascertained that perfect situations entail mutual coordination in real time, making physical co-presence the prerequisite and the state of being 'situation-like' symbolises such inadequacy of bilateral monitoring (Rettie, 2009; Subramaniam et al., 2013). Herein, social cues, which can hardly be observed from mediated communications, usually refer to body language, gesture, tone of voice and various other features (Goffman, 1959; Rettie, 2009). Based on these features, both ends of the interactions can be alerted as to the type of response to give and whether any adjustments are imperative (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Goffman, 1959).

More importantly, empirical evidence has been gathered to indicate that the insufficiency of social cues in the aforementioned ‘mediated’ contexts is able to intensify the cognitive demands on performers (e.g. Raghuram, 2013; Leonardi, 2013) and eventually obscure OIM performance, especially in conjunction with the anonymity of social media users (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). To sum up, it is proposed that social cues are far less accessible in interactions mediated by social media than in face-to-face situations and hence mediated interactions are deemed as ‘situation-like’ (i.e. mediated interactions can never fully simulate the conditions required by a perfect interactive situation due to the insufficiency of conventional social cues) (Solomon et al., 2013; Raghuram, 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Goffman, 1959). Also, the state of being ‘situation-like’ impedes the implementation of OIM on social media (Subramaniam et al., 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016).

Nevertheless, social media analytics has been found to fill the void of the aforementioned social cues, which are necessarily needed to foster a perfect interactive situation (Goffman, 1959; Rettie, 2009; Subramaniam et al., 2013), especially in the context of SMEs. Specifically, social media analytics remain one of the intrinsic characteristics of many social media platforms, which assists SMEs, with the provision of publication and engagement statistics, to gauge the efficacy of their social media postings (Guha, Paul, & Soutar, 2018). In doing so, OIM performance conveyed through the publicized social media postings (Benthaus, Risius, & Beck, 2016) can also be improved. To be specific, SMEs are empowered by social media analytics to measure, analyse and discern what appeal to their social media audiences (Ardley & Brooke, 2014; Guha, Paul, & Soutar, 2018). Thereby, based on the feedback gained from such analytics, they can refine the content of social media

postings, through which OIM strategies are conveyed (Benthaus, Risius, & Beck, 2016). It is noteworthy that such analytics are of critical importance to SMEs. SMEs usually suffer a lack of qualified employees (e.g. **C1**) (Doern, 2009; O'Dwyer, Gilmore, & Carson, 2009), and a comparatively low budget (e.g. **C3**) which handicaps their sustainability and expansion (Xu, Rohatgi, and Duan 2007). In this regard, given the fact that social media analytics is readily available (i.e. no sophisticated skills required) (Askool & Nakata, 2011; Guha, Paul, & Soutar, 2018), and affordable (i.e. no extra cost) (Harrigan & Miles, 2014), it is considered as a cost-effective tool for SMEs to solidify their customer engagement (Eid & EI-Gohary, 2013; Guha, Paul, & Soutar, 2018) and hence refine their OIM practice on social media.

Furthermore, social media analytics being used to discern audience demographics also facilitates the need of engaging the 'broadly defined audience group' (French & Read, 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016), in response to the 'collapsed context' elicited by social media (Marwick, 2010). Here, 'collapsed context' signals the heterogeneity of organisational audience on social media (Marwick, 2010; Farnham & Churchill, 2011). Specifically, social media diversifies an organisation's followers, whilst increasing the visibility of the organisation's publicised messages (French & Read, 2013). As a consequence, the heterogeneity of social media audiences (e.g. targeted users such as customers, and untargeted users such as bystanders, see Skovholt & Svennevig (2006), Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen (2014) for details) can pose more divergent cognitive demands on practitioners, who represent their companies on social media (Hogan, 2010), and make difficult their efforts to shape the perceptions of their social media followers (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). To mitigate such a situation, SMEs tend to construct social media postings that are cognitively acceptable to all types of their audience (i.e. messages conveyed

through social media postings can resonate with all types of audiences) and this is regarded as the ‘broadly defined audience group’ (French & Read, 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). Despite the fact that social media considerably diversifies a company’s follower base online, reasons why SMEs prefer to cater to all types of audience are firstly associated with their lack of business resources, a typical example of which is the insufficiency of qualified staff (Doern, 2009; O’Dwyer, Gilmore, & Carson, 2009; Stockdale et al., 2012; Ahmad et al., 2017). Thus, they do not have the capacity to customise the content of their social media postings to particularly cater to the specific, trivial demands of each type of their audience. Also, SMEs’ focus on the ‘broadly defined audience’ results from their goal of increasing their publicity by expanding their follower base on social media (Guha, Paul, & Soutar, 2018). Targeting on a more broadly defined follower group, instead of a specific segment of the heterogeneous audiences, is beneficial for reaching out to a larger population of social media users (Guha, Paul, & Soutar, 2018). Overall, social media analytics are considered to mitigate the aforementioned ‘collapsed context’ and consequently optimise the OIM practice by engaging the ‘broadly defined audience group’.

#### **8.4 Broader Implications**

This section further elaborates on the implications of this study from a broader perspective. This section features a triangulation between the findings based on secondary data (i.e. *Chapter 5* and *6*) and primary data (i.e. *Chapter 7*). Implications drawn from the triangulation are twofold. *Section 8.4.1* unfolds SMEs’ lack of OIM mentality in their daily operation of social media, based on which the practical contribution of this study is ascertained. *Section 8.4.2* presents how the identified

OIM practice remains relatively consistent across micro, small, and medium firms in this study. Plausible reasons are also provided to rationalise such a consistency.

#### **8.4.1 SMEs' Lack of OIM Mentality**

The findings based on key informant interviews reflect SMEs practitioners' lack of OIM mentality in terms of managing social media activities. According to **Table 29** (i.e. the third column under the category of 'Perceptions of OIM on Social Media'), SMEs' social media practitioners generally do not attain a strategic thinking towards OIM. In other words, their social media management is not motivated by the purpose of making particular impressions. For instance, some interviewees claimed that they attained no specific strategy on social media (e.g. *'we don't have strategies as you might have gathered'* (C1); *'I never really thought about it'* (C3)). In a similar vein, although others recognised the critical importance of positivizing their perceived impressions (e.g. *'we're always trying to make a positive impression to all of our audiences'* (C5)), they admitted that making positive impressions was not the drive for their social media activities (e.g. *'[our digital policy is] not necessarily around making good impressions'* (C5); *'I think we wouldn't incorporate that really into the quality of the posts'* (C6); *'I don't think that I have to think about it'* (C7) *'it's just another channel [i.e. social media] for us in our arsenal...there's little we need to do...'* (C8)).

Such a finding reaffirms the existing assertion pertaining to SMEs' deficiency in technical expertise in their top management (Halme & Korpela, 2014; López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017; Stockdale et al., 2012). Further, as revealed in **Table 29**, SMEs' most preferred impressions are mainly themed around 'engagingness', reflecting their intent to enhance the level of interactivity with their target audiences (e.g. *'it's that we are informative...we are a space for people to interact and engage with them'* (C5)



*‘...it’s very much about being very warm and very welcoming... we want other people to just engage with us...’ (C7); ‘we try to look for something that’s going to have a degree of engagement or sharing’ (C8)).* Such a finding corresponds to McCann & Barlow’s (2015) assertion on SMEs’ motives to adopt social media to engage with target audiences online as it is strongly argued that the top priority of SMEs’ social media adoption is increase awareness of the firm and expand follower base.

Nevertheless, this does not invalidate the findings presented in **Chapter 5** and **6**, since the organisational images and OIM strategies identified in this study have been thematically synthesised from the data created by sample firms themselves. Hence, the collected data truly reflects the operational activities of sample firms and hence *‘the phenomenon of interest’* (Pervin, 1984: p. 48), which remains the essence of qualitative case studies (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Moreover, there are evidently many scholarly inquires focusing on OIM practice in the context of large corporations. Among these studies, OIM is reportedly strategized to manage 1) gender diversity messages on corporate websites (e.g. Windscheid et al., 2016), 2) business sustainability in corporate reports (e.g. Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015), 3) functional accountability in annual reports (e.g. Conway, O’Keefe, & Hrasky, 2015), 4) CSR disclosures (e.g. Perks et al., 2013), and 5) strategy-making decisions (e.g. Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017). Also, large firms are ascertained to have incorporated OIM strategies with their digital policies (e.g. Benthaus, Risius, & Beck, 2016; Zaharopoulos & Kwok, 2017). All of these studies pinpoint the purposive employment of OIM strategies by corporate representatives to achieve or refine diversified organisational outcomes.

Given the fact that OIM is not purposefully ingrained with the way SMEs run their social media accounts, it is reasonable to infer that the identified organisational impressions and taxonomy of OIM strategies are merely a by-product of SMEs' social media management, which is motivated by their intent to increase publicity and expand follower base. The corroborated findings eventually shed light on the practice-based significance of this study as the identified organisational images and OIM strategies serve to nurture the OIM mentality of SMEs' practitioners and offer them a viable guidance to refine their future OIM performance on social media.

#### **8.4.2 Consistency of OIM Practice across Micro, Small, and Medium Firms**

The findings based on secondary data (i.e. *Chapter 5* and *6*) suggest that the OIM practice across different cases is relatively similar, although they vary in size (i.e. three micro firms, two small firms, and three medium firms). For instance, *Table 41* summarises all the dimensions of the identified organisational impressions across micro, small, and medium firms in the sample. Under each category of organisational impressions, it is evident that sample firms tend to address the same impression on a holistic level. The subtle difference is that they tend to illustrate different dimensions of the same image projected.

To be specific, under the category of 'professionalism', the dimensions commonly shared by all three classes of firms are 'organisational achievements', 'quality of work', and 'diversity'. The nuance lies with two dimensions, namely, 'capacity' and 'quality of networks', with which micro firms seemingly do not associate their image of being professional. When it comes to 'capacity', this is presumably due to micro firms' lack of resources, most noticeably, being short-staffed, so that they are unable to undertake the same volume of work as small and medium firms (Pett, Wolff, & Sié, 2012). However, whether or not 'quality of networks' is addressed is not necessarily

dictated by firm size. Evidence is that despite the fact that all three classes prefer to highlight the uniqueness of their products/services so that they can be viewed as creative, both micro firms and medium firms underscore their membership of a creativity-led cohort, in order to be perceived as creative. In terms of ‘social responsibility’, although a variety of dimensions (e.g. organisational value, mission, and identity) are used to highlight the relevant features regarding their commitment to local communities, the pro-social status shared by all three classes is explicitly communicated to the public. Finally, micro firms and medium firms both present the impression of being attractive by showcasing that they are capable of providing immersive experience to customers. Hence, ‘provision of immersive experience’ is not subject to firm size. To conclude, although they differ in size, sample firms are inclined to project the same impressions as the bulk of the addressed dimensions of each identified image are not necessarily related to their firm size.

**Table 41: Organisational Impressions Projected by Micro, Small, and Medium Firms**

| SMEs                       | Organisational Impressions   |  |   |   |
|----------------------------|--|--|---|---|
|                            | Professionalism  | Creativity   | Social Responsibility   | Attractiveness  |
| Micro Firms (C1, C2, & C3) | <p><b>Achievements</b> (e.g. awards won by participants of C1’s training programme)</p> <p><b>Quality of work</b> (e.g. C1’s bespoke work)</p> <p><b>Diversity</b> (e.g. a variety of programmes provided by C2)</p> | <p><b>Uniqueness of organisational offerings</b> (e.g. C3’s focus on non-traditional audience)</p> <p><b>External endorsement</b> (e.g. C1 being complimented for its creativity by media)</p> <p><b>Alignment</b> (e.g. C1 being a founding member of a creative collective of organisations)</p> | <p><b>Organisational value</b> (e.g. C3’s belief that theatre can transform lives)</p> <p><b>Organisational mission</b> (e.g. C1’s mission to combat social exclusion)</p> <p><b>Organisational identity</b> (e.g. C3’s profile as theatre for social change)</p> <p><b>Positive outcome of pro-social activities</b> (e.g. benefits of C1’s programmes confirmed by participants)</p> <p><b>Audience targeting</b> (e.g. C3’s focus on marginalised social groups)</p> | <p><b>Provision of immersive experience</b> (e.g. C2’s provision of ‘playful, moving, and inspiring theatre’)</p> <p><b>Appealing traits of facilities</b> (e.g. C3’s provision of free activities)</p> |

|  |  |  |  |   |
|--|--|--|--|---|
| <b>Small Firms (C4 &amp; C5)</b>       | <p><b>Achievements</b> (e.g. C5's award-winning building)</p> <p><b>Quality of work</b> (e.g. C5 claiming to be the UK's leading arts centre)</p> <p><b>Quality of networks/association</b> (e.g. C5 being a member of a renowned collective of organisations)</p> <p><b>Capacity</b> (e.g. C5 hosting a large number of commissions)</p> <p><b>Diversity</b> (e.g. C4's story narrated in several episodes)</p> | <p><b>Uniqueness of organisational offerings</b> (e.g. C4's unconventional artworks)</p> <p><b>External endorsement</b> (e.g. C5 being complimented for its creativity by media)</p> | <p><b>Organisational value</b> (e.g. work with youth, school, community, and family remains <i>'the very heart'</i> of all C5's work);</p> <p><b>Organisational mission</b> (e.g. C4's support for new ideas of social change);</p> <p><b>Audience targeting</b> (e.g. C4's focus on child-oriented education programme)</p>   | <p><b>Appealing traits of facilities</b> (e.g. C5's café, bar &amp; sofa-seated film screens)</p>   |
| <b>Medium Firms (C6, C7, &amp; C8)</b> | <p><b>Achievements</b> (e.g. C6's award-winning gallery);</p> <p><b>Quality of work</b> (e.g. C7 claiming to be a world-class theatre);</p> <p><b>Capacity</b> (e.g. high frequency of performances hosted in C8's venue);</p> <p><b>Diversity</b> (e.g. C8's diversified audience demographics)</p>   | <p><b>Uniqueness of organisational offerings</b> (e.g. C7's unusual seating in the theatre);</p> <p><b>Alignment</b> (e.g. C7's partnership with other creative institutions)</p>    | <p><b>Organisational value</b> (e.g. C7's belief in theatre for empowering the disabled);</p> <p><b>Organisational mission</b> (e.g. C8's mission to enhance and transform lives through music);</p> <p><b>Positive outcome of pro-social activities</b> (e.g. compliment made by a beneficiary of C7's programme);</p> <p><b>Audience targeting</b> (e.g. C8's focus on vulnerable adults &amp; child-led programmes)</p> | <p><b>Provision of immersive experience</b> (e.g. C7's story-telling designed to <i>'make you laugh, cry and sit on the edge of your seat'</i>);</p> <p><b>Appealing traits of facilities</b> (e.g. C6's building, garden &amp; craft activities)</p> |

In a similar vein, the use of OIM strategies is found to be consistent across micro, small, and medium firms as well. According to **Table 42**, it is evident that all three classes of firms tend to underline their externally endorsed qualifications and these qualifications are endorsed by renowned media (i.e. under the category of 'qualification-oriented strategies'). It is noteworthy that the media is renowned in the area pertaining to the focal firms. Also, all three classes of firms tend to showcase their relationship with notable entities (i.e. under the category of 'relationship-oriented strategies') and these entities are notable in the area highly relevant to the focal firms.

**Table 42: OIM Strategies Employed by Micro, Small, and Medium Firms**

| SMEs                        | OIM Strategies   |   |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
|                             | Qualification-Oriented Strategies  | Relationship-Oriented Strategies  |
| Micro Firms (C1, C2, & C3)  | e.g. C1 was portrayed as ' <i>national pioneer</i> ' by a magazine themed around theatre                     | e.g. C3 disclosed its cooperation with a renowned footballer                      |
| Small Firms (C4 & C5)       | e.g. C4's programme was complimented as ' <i>provocative, relevant and sometimes silly</i> ' an art magazine | e.g. C4 revealed its partnership with a prestigious designer                      |
| Medium Firms (C6, C7, & C8) | e.g. C8's location was regarded as ' <i>a place to visit</i> ' by a locally renowned newspaper               | e.g. C8 emphasised the linkage between its promoted film and a milestone TV drama |

Subtle difference in terms of SMEs' use of OIM strategies is also identified across micro, small, and medium firms. As summarised in **Table 29**, the content posted on micro and small firms' social media accounts is relatively consistent and mainly consists of three parts: 1) self-initiated content such as the firm's own production and 2) other-initiated content such as production made by partners, which is often done by means of interacting with others on social media (e.g. sharing, liking, and retweeting); and 3) news that is considered relevant or worth sharing (e.g. news about the Turner Prize). Nevertheless, medium firms tend to share less other-initiated content, meaning that they interact less with other organisations on social media, when compared with micro and small firms. This can be rationalised by the fact that medium firms' social media accounts are populated by self-initiated activities including programmes, projects, and events, allowing less room for promoting others' activities (i.e. '*we have so much stuff to talk about ourselves*' (C8)). In other words, medium firms obtain relatively more resources (Pett, Wolff, & Sié, 2012) than micro and small firms to run their businesses and hence have more self-initiated activities to display on social media. As a consequence, OIM practice across micro, small, and medium firms on social media is holistically similar, meaning that the differences of OIM practice across micro, small, and medium firms are rather subtle and not necessarily subject to their discrepancy in size.

Implications can be drawn from the triangulation between the findings based on secondary data (i.e. **Chapter 5** and **6**) and primary data (i.e. **Chapter 7**) to rationalise the consistency of OIM practice across firms of different sizes in this study. Firstly, as suggested by Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland (2016), firms of different sizes share structural similarities in terms of managing social media postings, meaning that what they are demanded to do day-in and day-out is not contrasting, although they may embark on different work routines. Secondly, their organisational offerings are all themed around arts. There are explicit overlaps among each firm's art-related products/services (see **Table 16** for details). In a similar vein, their target audiences online tend to overlap as well. As summarised in **Table 29**, they intend to engage with people who attain an interest in art. Some of the cases even tend to engage with a broader audience, namely, the general public (e.g. **C1** and **C3**). This is in line with the existing literature (see French & Read, 2013; Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Marwick, 2010; Farnham & Churchill, 2011 for details), since OIM endeavours on social media are directed towards a broadly defined audience group in response to the additional cognitive demands imposed by the heterogeneity of social media users (i.e. social media posts are constructed in a way that is cognitively acceptable to all). Also, the recipients of social media posts consist of not only followers, but also non-addressed users and bystanders (Skovholt & Svennevig, 2006; Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014). Therefore, it is pivotal to impress non-followers so that they can be converted to followers. This again illustrates sample firms' inclination of engaging a wide audience on social media and hence their target audience groups are overlapped. Moreover, as implied in **Section 8.4.1**, SMEs' primary goal of using social media is to increase publicity and expand follower base. Guided by such a goal, they rely on social media analytics to discern who their audiences are, and what appeals to their

audiences (see *Section 8.3.3* for details). Given the feedback provided by social media analytics, SMEs tend to post the content, which they think would entertain or appeal to their audiences. Since the target audiences of sample firms are analogous, the content posted on each firm's social media accounts, although underpins the specifics of their organisational features, is likely to be similar in nature. Consequently, their OIM practice, which is conveyed by social media posts, is likely to be consistent from a holistic perspective. Overall, the findings based on such a homogeneous sample can reflect the realities of each sample firm. The next chapter features a conclusion of the whole thesis, mainly consisting of summary of research context, key findings, research contributions, limitations, and implications for future research.

## **CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION**

### **9.1 Introduction**

This thesis contributes to the existing OIM literature of by empirically investigating how OIM is practised by SMEs on social media. The findings of this study relate to OIM practice within the context of SMEs and social media. In this chapter, the key findings of this research study are summarised alongside the research contributions, limitations, and implications for future research. Thus, this chapter is structured by firstly specifying the context of this piece of research. Secondly, both theoretical and practical contributions of this study are elaborated. Finally, limitations are detailed and viable directions for future research are illuminated.

### **9.2 Summary of Research Context and key Findings**

In this section, the research context and the key findings of this study are revisited, which elicit the implications for future research.

#### **9.2.1 Research Context**

Organisational impression management (OIM) has become a renowned phenomenon in recent years both as an organisational strategy and as a managerial practice (e.g. Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014; Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Zaharopoulos & Kwok, 2017; Bullock, 2018). The conceptualisation of OIM is rooted in Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model of social interaction in which individuals are metaphorically portrayed as 'actors' delivering crafted 'performances' in front of 'audiences'. Evidently, Goffman's (1959) assertion of social interaction, which is widely considered as the antecedent of OIM (e.g. Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2011; Solomon et al., 2013; Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013), was contextualised at the interpersonal level (i.e. individuals as 'actors') until more recently it was applied



to the organizational settings (i.e. organisations as ‘actors’) (Bolino et al., 2008; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016; Zaharopoulos & Kwok, 2017; Bullock, 2018). Since OIM mainly involves with ‘*any action that is purposefully designed and carried out to influence an audience’s perceptions of the organization*’ (Elsbach, Sutton, & Principe, 1998: P. 68), a variety of OIM strategies have been developed to interpret the phenomenon, among which Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo’s (1999) taxonomy of OIM strategies are most extensively adopted in many recent publications (e.g. Perks et al., 2013; Conway, O’Keefe, & Hrasky, 2015; Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015; Tata & Prasad, 2015; Windscheid et al., 2016; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016; Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017; Zaharopoulos & Kwok, 2017).

Prior OIM literature is limited in three aspects. Firstly, the changing organisational contexts have triggered the formulation of new OIM strategies or advancement of existing strategies (e.g. Bansal & Kistruck, 2006; Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015; Graffin, Haleblian, & Kiley, 2016). Specifically, Bansal & Kistruck (2006) proposed two new sets of strategies – ‘demonstrative’ and ‘illustrative’ strategies – for large corporations to defend their commitment to environmental sustainability against public doubts. Also, Sandberg & Holmlund (2015) synthesised four OIM strategies that are exclusively related to rhetorical styles (i.e. ‘subjective’, ‘positive’, ‘vague’, and ‘emotional’) from corporate reports in order to convince the stakeholders that the business is healthily sustained. Such rhetoric-specific OIM strategies had rarely been addressed in preceding studies (Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015). Furthermore, Graffin, Haleblian, & Kiley (2016), building on expectancy violation theory, introduced a new technique, ‘impression offsetting’, which was employed by organisational leaders to mitigate the anticipated negativity of a focal event. This technique indeed extends the notion of anticipatory OIM strategies that was initially put forth by studies such as

Elsbach, Sutton, & Principe (1988). Therefore, it is suggested that new strategies or new ways of using existing strategies could be developed to accommodate different organisational contexts.

Secondly, prior literature marks a scarcity of empirical research exploring how OIM is integrated with organisations' social media presence as a means to retain desired organisational images (Bolino et al., 2008; Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014; Fieseler & Ranzini, 2015). Social media, defined as a variety of internet-based media platforms which facilitate highly interactive communications among users (Mayfield, 2008), has revolutionised the conventional communication between organisations and their stakeholders (Shi et al., 2014; Aral et al., 2013). Provided the fact that it greatly enhances the level of interactivity between organisations and their target audiences (Libai et al., 2013; Clark and Melancon, 2013; Benthous, Risius, & Beck, 2016), social media has facilitated the development of new OIM strategies that could rarely be observed in interpersonal interactions. For instance, Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen (2014) proposed a new OIM strategy – 'diversion' – implementation of which is only made viable through social media. This strategy, representing an organisation's efforts to minimise unwanted attention to image-threatening issues, is necessitated by the algorithm of Facebook and hence is unlikely to be implemented in offline situations (Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014). Moreover, organisations are faced with greater level of risks in terms of controlling their perceived images, since negative information circulates rapidly on social media (Wang et al., 2011; Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). Therefore, they are expected to retain the control by means of more active OIM (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011; Veil, Sellnow, & Petrun, 2012). In other words, social media might

trigger new OIM strategies that exert more control over the publicized images. To sum up, it is suggested that new OIM strategies or new ways of using existing strategies can be developed to embark on the distinctive features of social media.

Finally, the majority of the existing empirical studies have been conducted within the settings of large firms (e.g. Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014; Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015; Conway, O’Keefe, & Hrasky, 2015; Benthaus, Risius, & Beck, 2016; Zaharopoulos & Kwok, 2017). Nonetheless, there are fundamental discrepancies between large firms and SMEs in several respects. Notably, SMEs, unlike large corporations which benefit immensely from economies of scale (Saridakis et al., 2008; Storey & Greene, 2010), usually suffer restricted access to market power (Stokes & Wilson, 2006; Storey & Greene, 2010) and hence they are more reliant upon customer loyalty (Storey & Greene, 2010; Gras-Gil et al., 2016; Galbreath, 2017) and inter-organisational collaborations (Muscio, 2007; Maskell & Malmberg, 1999; Waalkens et al., 2004). Moreover, SMEs often have a relatively more personalised style in management (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017; Cosh et al., 2005; Mazzarole, 2014). Such personalised style results from 1) a scarcity of functional knowhow and expertise in their leadership and top management (Halme & Korpela, 2014; López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017; Stockdale et al., 2012); 2) a lack of qualified employees (Doern, 2009; O’Dwyer, Gilmore, & Carson, 2009) and staff training (Zeiller & Schauer, 2011; Ahmad et al., 2017; Beynon et al., 2015); and 3) informal internal organisation (Curran & Blackburn, 2001). In addition, since SMEs are more strategically flexible and adaptable to the changing environment (Man et al., 2002), they have a stronger interest in commercialising innovation (Van Praag & Versloot, 2007). A further aspect is that SMEs normally uphold closer ties to local communities as they acquire resources from, and are

expected to repay the favour to the locality (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017; Sen & Cowley, 2013). Overall, given all these discrepancies, SMEs are likely to shape impressions in ways that largely differ from those prevalent in large firms. More importantly, there is little empirical research exploring OIM practice in the context of SMEs. Prior studies probing SMEs' OIM practice have mostly built upon an entrepreneurial perspective (e.g. Benson et al., 2014; Yusuf, 2011; Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014; Tang, Khan, & Zhu, 2012). Nevertheless, such studies have only undertaken OIM enacted by entrepreneurs in response to 1) resource acquisition (e.g. Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014); 2) Rationalization of Misconducts (e.g. Benson et al., 2015); and 3) moderation of self-views (e.g. Shepherd & Haynie, 2011). It is noteworthy that entrepreneurs' OIM enactment unavoidably embodies IM behaviours only suitable in face-to-face interactions, such as entrepreneurs' charisma in communicating their business ideas to potential investors in person (e.g. Yusuf, 2011). Also, such individual-level IM pertains more to the entrepreneurs themselves (i.e. individuals), rather than their new ventures (i.e. organisations). Thus, it is regarded as individual-level IM in organisational settings (Bolino et al., 2008). Further, this type of IM primarily targets investors who are expected to finance the new venture (e.g. Yusuf, 2011; Nagy et al., 2012; Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014), rather than audiences (e.g. customers, participants, visitors, internet followers etc.) who are supposed to constantly sustain the development of the company. Consequently, it is of critical importance to understand how OIM is practised in the context of SMEs.

Considering the research gaps elaborated above, the overall research aim of this study is to explore 'how OIM is practiced by SMEs on social media'. Accordingly, three research questions have been established to achieve the overall research aim as follows:

**RQ1:** How do SMEs desire to be perceived online (what are SMEs' desired organisational impressions/images online)?

**RQ2:** In order to shape the desired impressions/images online, what OIM strategies do SMEs employ on social media?

**RQ3:** What organisational qualities have affected SMEs' OIM practice on social media?

### **9.2.2 Methodology**

In order to answer these three research questions respectively, coupled with the fact that these three research questions are in essence exploratory questions (i.e. 'how' and 'what' questions), this study adopts a qualitative, inductive multiple-case study that features data collected from three different sources: 1) firm manifestos; 2) social media postings; and 3) key informant interviews. Each part of the methodological design is elaborated below.

The present study was carried out with a constructivist paradigm, since the nature of its research subject fundamentally rejects the application of positivism. Specially, it is evident that the communication between SMEs and their social media audiences (i.e. social media postings), is socially constructed and will not stay unchanged. For instance, firms tend to construct their social media posts in a way that they think appeal to their target audiences and they certainly alter the content of the posts, if the particular posts fail to entertain their target audiences (see Wang et al., 2011 for details). This complies with the ontological assumption of constructivism that the realities of the focal phenomenon are socially constructed. Also, impressions/perceptions are inherently subjective (Elsbach, 2003). Hence, even the same social cue may be interpreted in different ways and elicit different

impressions/perceptions when being embarked on in different contexts. For instance, different researchers may form different views of the same phenomenon, according to Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland (2016). Evidently, this echoes the epistemological assumption of constructivism as the true meaning of knowledge is internally constructed. As a result, coupled with the fact that case studies are commonly built upon a constructivist paradigm (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014), the present study was carried out with a constructivist paradigm.

To avoid risking the richness of the data, the research subjects were purposively selected with the following criteria: 1) SMEs (headcount from 1 to 249); 2) industry (code: 90 – Creative, Arts and Entertainment Activities in the ‘FAME’ database); 3) region (Northwest of England); 4) social media presence (must have at least one regularly updated social media account); and 5) accessibility (must give informed consent for interviews). Finally, a total of 8 SMEs were selected.

The data collection approach was designed to address Bolino et al.’s (2008: p. 1098) call for studies collecting data from different sources or levels to form a more comprehensive understanding of how organisations adopt OIM to ‘*strategically position themselves in eyes of their stakeholders*’. Such a combination of primary and secondary data was expected to comprehensively capture how OIM is strategically practised by SMEs to engage with their social media audiences (Bashir et al., 2008).

Specifically, data collection process commenced with gathering firm manifestos from the official website of each selected firm in order to understand what organisational impressions SMEs attempted to shape online (i.e. RQ1). Here, a manifesto denotes each company’s self-reflection on its goal, mission, vision, value, history and work theme which are normally publicized under the section titled ‘about us’ and other

equivalents such as ‘heritage’ and ‘how we work’. The data collection process continued, using a second source – social media postings – which was intended to thematise a taxonomy of OIM strategies adopted by SMEs on social media. Social media postings that were publicised during the period from 1st Jun. 2016 to 30th Apr. 2017 (i.e. 11 months in total) have been collected for analysis. The final phase of data collection featured a series of in-depth interviews with the purpose of identifying what affected sample firms’ OIM performance on social media. A total of 8 interviews (i.e. one for each firm) were conducted and these interviews were semi-structured to allow for flexibility. All the interviewees were practitioners who took charge in managing social media accounts on behalf of their companies.

The present study features an in-depth thematic analysis for each dataset in a six-stage process (see **Table 20** for details). Drawing upon Kempster & Cope (2010) and Braun & Clarke (2006), the thematic analysis was carried out through the lens of each research question, without subscribing to any theoretical preference or priori hypotheses (i.e. inductive, qualitative approach).

### **9.2.3 Key Findings**

#### **9.2.3.1 Desired Organisational Impressions Projected by SMEs Online**

The key findings of this study are threefold. The first set of findings features four types of organisational impressions including ‘professionalism’, ‘social responsibility’, ‘attractiveness’, and ‘creativity’, in order to discern how SMEs prefer to be viewed in the eyes of their social media audiences (i.e. **RQ1**). It is noteworthy that the identified organisational impressions, when compared with those developed in the existing literature (i.e. Jones & Pittman, 1982; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999), are shaped by the following characteristics of the research context of the present study.

Firstly, ‘professionalism’ mainly reflects SMEs’ emphasis on the quality of their products/services and social networks, which primarily results from SMEs’ lack of leverage in price setting and market power (Stokes & Wilson, 2006; Storey & Greene, 2010). Secondly, ‘social responsibility’ remains an intrinsic virtue and a desired organisational impression for SMEs as it primarily refers to SMEs’ commitment to the wellbeing of the local communities (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017; Orlitzky et al., 2011; Galbreath, 2017), whilst large corporations do not share the same level of intimacy with the locality (Sen & Cowley, 2013; López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017). Furthermore, ‘attractiveness’, as is prevalently reflected in SMEs’ facilities that serve to enhance customer experience, is dictated by SMEs’ reliance upon customer loyalty (Van de Ven & Jeurissen, 2005; Du et al., 2007) (i.e. demonstration of appealing attributions of their facilities to entertain customers). Finally, ‘creativity’ is a reflection of SMEs’ pursuit in innovation (Van Praag & Versloot, 2007; López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017; Thomas et al., 2004), which is an optimal solution to SMEs’ constrained access to market power (Durand & Coeurderoy, 2001; Man et al., 2002; Rangone, 1999). More importantly, SMEs’ lack of interest in being viewed as dangerous or needy, as opposed to large firms (i.e. large firms might do so in situations where they need to impose power or solicit support. See Jones & Pittman, 1982; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Bolino et al., 2008; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016 for details), is rooted in their dependency on the relationships with customers (Deakins & Freel, 2012; Stokes & Wilson, 2006), local communities (Orlitzky et al., 2011; López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017; Galbreath, 2017), and collaborative organisations (Muscio, 2007; Maskell & Malmberg, 1999; Waalkens et al., 2004).



### **9.2.3.2 OIM Strategies Employed by SMEs on Social Media**

To understand what OIM strategies SMEs employ on social media to shape the desired organisational impressions (i.e. **RQ2**), a taxonomy of two main sets of OIM strategies: qualification-oriented strategies and relationship-oriented strategies, have been identified. In comparison to the taxonomies developed in prior research (i.e. Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999 as cited in Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016), the taxonomy identified in the present study is 1) contextualised by the characteristics of SMEs and social media; 2) assertive and positivity-laden; and 3) flexible and versatile.

Firstly, the identified taxonomy concentrates on organisational qualifications and relationships. The former, which reflects SMEs' emphasis on the approved quality of their products/services, mainly stems from SMEs' lack of market power (Saridakis et al., 2008; Storey & Greene, 2010). The latter, which symbolises SMEs' emphasis on their social networks, is primarily shaped by 1) their reliance on customer loyalty (Deakins & Freel, 2012; Stokes & Wilson, 2006), commitment to local communities (Orlitzky et al., 2011; López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017; Galbreath, 2017), and inter-organisational collaborations (Muscio, 2007; Maskell & Malmberg, 1999; Waalkens et al., 2004); and 2) the functionality of social media by means of liking, sharing, and commenting (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013; Kane et al., 2014; Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Secondly, the identified taxonomy mainly incorporates OIM strategies that are assertive and positivity-laden. Such a lack of defensive or negativity-laden strategies is rooted in 1) SMEs' reluctance of damaging the rapport with customers (Deakins & Freel, 2012), local communities (Galbreath, 2017), and partners (Muscio, 2007); and 2) the lack of particular focus on SMEs' response to controversies in this study. Finally, the identified taxonomy features a flexible alignment between

organisational images and OIM strategies. In the existing taxonomy developed by Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo (1999), one OIM strategy can only be used to project one unique organisational image. In contrast, both qualification-oriented and relationship-oriented strategies in the identified taxonomy can be used to project all four identified organisational images. The flexibility of the identified taxonomy is considered as versatile to fit the context of SMEs, since their owner-managers are obligated to undertake multiple tasks (López-Pérez, Melero, & Sese, 2017), whilst they normally lack expertise to handle all the tasks (Halme & Korpela, 2014; Packham et al., 2005).

#### **9.2.3.3 Organisational Qualities Affecting SMEs' OIM Practice on Social Media**

Seven organisational qualities have been identified in order to understand what organisational qualities have affected SMEs' OIM practice on social media (i.e. **RQ3**). Drawing upon Lampadario's (2017: p. 52) framework of SMEs success factors, these organisational qualities can be classified into three categories: 1) individual quality, including 'nature of practitioner'; 2) enterprise qualities, including 'division of roles and responsibilities', 'work routine', 'work principle', and 'evaluation system'; and 3) business environment qualities, including 'nature of industry' and 'functionality of social media'.

These organisational qualities mainly contribute to extending the existing knowledge base in following areas. Firstly, in terms of individual quality, as opposed to the common notion that the blurring of the boundaries between a practitioner's personal and professional social media accounts might inflict damage to the perpetuated organisational impressions of his/her company (Wang et al., 2011; Westphal et al., 2012; McDonnell & King, 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016), it is identified that such blurring can benefit the overall organisational impressions under

the circumstance where a practitioner regularly monitors the social media activities of other like-minded firms, using her own social media accounts in leisure time, in search of inspirations for managing her company's social media postings. Secondly, enterprise qualities serve to not only demarcate the boundaries between, as articulated by Goffman (1959), 'frontstage' (i.e. the area where information can be viewed by all) and 'backstage' (i.e. the area where information is concealed from public view), but also readjust such boundaries by disclosing information that is conventionally concealed from target audiences. A typical form of such information disclosure is behind-the-scenes (BTS) content. Finally, business environment qualities indicate that social media analytics can fill the void of conventional social cues (e.g. body languages), which are deemed inviable in the communications mediated by social media (Goffman, 1959; Rettie, 2009; Subramaniam et al., 2013).

#### **9.2.3.4 Triangulation of Findings Based on Secondary Data and Primary Data**

The triangulation of the findings based on secondary data (i.e. *Chapter 5* and *6*) and primary data (i.e. *Chapter 7*) suggests that SMEs' social media management is motivated by simply increasing publicity and expanding follower base. This further indicates that practitioners lack an OIM mentality when undertaking their social media activities on behalf of their companies. A related finding is that OIM practice remains consistent across micro, small, and medium firms in the sample. This is presumably due to, regardless of their difference in size, their congruence in 1) 'structural similarities' (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016: p. 613) (i.e. posting content on business accounts); 2) nature of trading activities (i.e. arts-based activities); 3) audience base (i.e. broadly defined audience group); and 4) approach to discern audience preferences (i.e. social media analytics).

## **9.3 Research Contributions**

### **9.3.1 Theoretical Contributions**

This study has firstly extended the current literature by identifying organisational impressions and OIM strategies that cater to the specific settings of SMEs on social media. The sample firms were selected from the creative industry (i.e. industry code in the FAME database: 90 – 90 – Creative, Arts and Entertainment Activities) in the region of Northwest England. It is suggested that the identified organisational impressions and OIM strategies differ significantly from those documented within the settings of large firms (i.e. Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999), signalling that they are fundamentally shaped by the specified context of this study (i.e. OIM practised on social media by SMEs in creative industries). It is evident that such research context is underdeveloped as prior literature predominantly concentrates on OIM enacted by 1) large firms (e.g. Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014), or 2) entrepreneurs (i.e. individual-level IM in organisational settings as it heavily involves IM at the individual level to pose an impact on organisational outcomes such as entrepreneurs' charisma used to legitimise their new ventures, see Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014 for instance). Since this study exclusively focuses on OIM practised by SMEs on social media, the originality of this study's contribution can be secured.

Secondly, this study also provides novel evidence that works to extend some key propositions in prior literature. Firstly, the positive influence of individuals (i.e. self-learning behaviours) on team performance in projecting organisational impressions has been identified, whilst the bulk of extant literature concentrate on the negativity caused by individual members of a team, which might impede the collective OIM performance (McDonnell & King, 2013; Westphal et al., 2012), especially in the context of SMEs (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). To be specific, it is

ascertained in the existing literature that the blurring of the boundary between a practitioner's personal and professional use of social media accounts can potentially result in mishandling of information, including the use of bad language, emotional outbursts and the posting of offensive material (see Wang et al., 2011 for details). Nevertheless, in this study, such blurring, which takes the form of using personal social media accounts for professional purposes can sometimes benefit the overall OIM practice. For instance, a practitioner was found to monitor social media activities of other like-minded organisations, using her own social media accounts, in her leisure time, in search of inspirations that could be emulated. Moreover, this study also identifies that behind-the-scene (BTS) content, serves to voluntarily disclose certain information such as backstage rehearsals, which, as suggested in the existing literature (e.g. Goffman, 1959; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016), ought to be concealed from public view at frontage. BTS content renders positive the blurring of the boundary between frontstage and backstage, which was regarded as destructive to the perceived organisational images (Vieira de Cuhna, 2013; Raghuram, 2013), especially in the case of SMEs (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). Finally, social media analytics in mediated conversations were found to fill the void of conventional social cues such as body language, which were ascertained to be exclusively accessible in interpersonal interactions (Subramaniam et al., 2013; Rettie, 2009; Goffman, 1959). Prior literature suggests that lack of conventional social cues in mediated conversations can place additional cognitive demands on performers and hence obstruct OIM performance (Raghuram, 2013; Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). Since social media analytics can be used to discern what appeals to their social media audiences (Ardley & Brooke, 2014; Guha, Paul, & Soutar, 2018), mediated conversations are enabled to solidify customer engagement on social media, in which

case OIM failures can be mitigated. Therefore, the aforementioned findings are believed to enrich the existing propositions pertaining to individuality's influence on overall OIM performance (i.e. 'team performance'), influence of the blurring of the boundary between frontstage and backstage in performing OIM (i.e. 'frontstage and backstage analogy'), and influence of insufficient conventional social cues on OIM practice mediated by social media (i.e. 'social cues in mediated conversations'), by offering insights that have rarely been documented in prior literature.

Further, this piece of research answers calls by prior studies including Bolino et al. (2008), Sandberg & Holmlund (2015), and Benthaus, Risius, & Beck (2016). To be specific, Bolino et al. (2008) galvanise future research to collect data from different sources or levels so as to optimally grasp how organisations adopt OIM to '*strategically position themselves in the eyes of their stakeholders*' (Bolino et al., 2008: p. 1098). The present study follows this research direction as it features data collected from three different sources including firm manifestos, social media postings, and key informant interviews. The findings yielded by these three datasets collectively paint a comprehensive picture of how OIM is strategically practiced by SMEs to engage with social media audiences. Additionally, this study also furthers the inquiry into new theoretical models of OIM that transcend the existing settings (i.e. Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999), in order to encapsulate the distinctive aspects '*at the organisational level*' (Bolino et al., 2008: p. 1099), by developing a taxonomy of OIM strategies that caters to the characteristics of SMEs in the specified industries and region.

This thesis also responds to the calls by more recent studies. Firstly, Sandberg & Holmlund (2015) advise that more in-depth case studies are entailed to optimise the understanding of the use of OIM strategies in organisational communications.

Similarly, in the present study, a qualitative multiple-case study approach was employed to grasp how OIM is strategically deployed in one form of organisational communications, namely, conversations (i.e. mediated by social media) between SMEs and their social media audiences. Also, this thesis sheds light on, from an OIM perspective, how OIM can be integrated with social media activities (see **Chapter 8** for details), and therefore it offers insights regarding ‘*companies build up capabilities for understanding social media activities*’, which is strongly recommended by Benthaus, Risius, & Beck (2016).

Finally, from a methodological perspective, this study offers a plausibly ‘standardised’ form for future OIM research to derive upon. First of all, to eschew the futile complexities that might ‘*frustrate efforts to develop this area*’ (Bolino et al., 2008: p.1098), a multi-phased, progressively related set of research questions were established (i.e. **RQ1** is mainly associated with organisational impressions, which can be understood as OIM motives (Pittman & Jones, 1982; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999; Brandon-Lai, Armstrong, & Ferris, 2016); **RQ2** with OIM strategies guided by the motives; and **RQ3** with organisational qualities affecting the strategized OIM practice). These research questions combined uphold a logically coherent, justifiable line of reasoning and hence potentially provide a concrete example for future research that intends to explore OIM enactment in other contexts. Moreover, future research may also capitalise on how research questions are aligned with the datasets. In this case, the nature of the research questions dictates that one dataset is exclusively responsible for answering one specific research question. Since the research questions are interrelated, the assigned datasets are intrinsically interrelated. As a result, the findings yielded from the datasets can be triangulated to elicit broader insights. Overall, the methodology of this study exemplifies how to understand SMEs’

OIM enactment on social media. When guided by a research interest of understanding OIM enactment in an alternative context (e.g. other platforms), it is feasible to replicate the methodology with modifications that accommodate the distinctive characteristics of the new context.

### **9.3.2 Practical Contributions**

The practical contribution of this thesis is centred on the positive relationship between a firm's OIM practice and financial performance. In other words, effective OIM practice is pivotal to SMEs as OIM, as ascertained in prior studies (e.g. Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013), serves to improve a firm's financial performance. Specifically, OIM strategies are often employed to capitalise on the information asymmetry (i.e. promotion of positive information and concealment of negative information) (Săndulescu, 2017), through which organisations are able to gain trust and support from key stakeholders (e.g. customers) (Jaworska & Bucior, 2017). In doing so, organisations are empowered to reinforce their competitive advantages (Inglis, Morley, & Sammut, 2006), most notably, organisational reputation (Jaworska & Bucior, 2017). Since organisational reputation contributes to offering a reserve of goodwill, firms with relatively better reputations are more likely to sustain superior profit outcome than others in the long run (Roberts & Dowling, 2002). Therefore, firms extensively carry out OIM strategies in their external reporting in relation to sustainability (e.g. Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015), environmental protection (e.g. Bansal & Kistruck, 2006), and financials (e.g. Boiral 2016), among which OIM conveyed through social media posts is most relevant to this thesis (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013). It is articulated that a firm's financial performance can be improved if the firm's competitive strengths are strategically communicated to its target audience on social media (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013).



Overall, since this thesis contributes to 1) nurturing the strategic thinking of SMEs from an OIM perspective, and 2) offering a viable guidance for SMEs to understand and refine their OIM performance on social media, in which case their existing digital policies can be integrated with, and strategized by, an OIM mentality, their financial performance can reasonably be boosted.

## **9.4 Research Limitations**

### **9.4.1 Choice of Study**

The limitations of this study are anchored in three areas: choice of study, design of study, and data collection and analysis. According to the acknowledged limitations, corresponding directions for future research, especially in the field of OIM and SMEs' social media management will be elaborated at the end of this section.

This first limitation is related to the research sample. This study was conducted with a purposively selected sample consisting SMEs that are established in the creative industries and are located in Northwest of England. Therefore, caution must be exercised in generalising the findings to different contexts (e.g. alternative industries, regions, or company sizes). It is underpinned that some aspects of the OIM practice may not be traced in alternative contexts. For instance, companies in other industries might not prioritise 'creative' as a desired organisational image in the eyes of their target audiences. Also, it is reasonable to assume that OIM practice explored in this study might be efficacious in one cultural context, but futile in another (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016).

### **9.4.2 Design of Study**

This study is also exposed to limitations regarding the design of this study. Although an intensive empirical research was carried out on the eight cases selected, it was still

subject to limited access, time and financial resources. It ought to be acknowledged that the findings of this study exclusively represent the analysed data. It would be more fruitful if the study could be conducted in a longer time period to encapsulate more insights from social media postings and with more cases to constitute a more heterogeneous sample. For instance, this study could benefit from extended access to social media analytics of each sample firm. A related limitation is that the findings might be affected by a sample bias since only companies that are active on social media were analysed in order to secure the richness of the data. This is presumably the reason why the bulk of OIM strategies identified in this study are used to positivize organisational impressions rather than impose power over others (e.g. strategies such as intimidation, see Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999 for details) or fend off threats to organisational images (e.g. strategies such as excuse, see Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999 for details), although negative messages circulate more rapidly on social media compared with positive ones (Dellarocas, 2003). Also, only one respondent for each sample firm was willing to participate in the interviews. This study might capture more insights if other members of the team (i.e. for running social media accounts) for each sample firm could participate. Consequently, one should not consider each sample firm as fully representative of the whole population in its industry. This again restricts the generalisability of the findings of this study. In addition, this study does not incorporate the technology development that could have fundamentally changed the whole landscape of the inquired phenomena. New forms of social media such as Weibo, Wechat, and Whatsapp, which could be easily accessed through mobile devices and allow for great personalisation (e.g. automated responses), have emerged for and could be useful for SMEs to sustain and grow their businesses. Nonetheless, this study was planned and initiated in 2014, when social networking

sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter were still the hype (Shi et al., 2014; Ainin et al., 2015; Atanassova & Clark, 2015). Thus, future studies might take account of the dynamics of the fast-changing technology by focusing on trendy social media platforms that might optimise SMEs' OIM practice.

#### **9.4.3 Data Collection and Analysis**

The next set of limitations are associated with the data collection and data analysis approach used in this study. Firstly, although the data was collected from three different sources and the person in charge of managing social media accounts on behalf of each sample firm was interviewed with an exhaustive list of questions, this study could have benefited from insights from a multiple stakeholder perspective. For instance, this study might capitalise on the opinions of the owners or key personnel from other departments (i.e. to explore the extent to which OIM on social media is ingrained with the overall promotional strategy), if applicable. Moreover, since some of the social media practitioners interviewed in this study had a tight schedule when contacted, they could have offered more insights, if given more time to prepare for the interviews.

When it comes to data analysis, the reliability of the coding process is arguably constrained by the subjectivity of the researcher. This is firstly because qualitative studies, which value personal involvement and partiality, often endure a shift in focus during the research process, and require a long time to interpret the data (Ashworth, 2003; Tolich & Davidson, 2003). Another reason is that only one coder was involved in the whole process. Thus, this study was unable to obtain inter-coder reliability (Bruan & Clarke, 2006; Kempster & Cope, 2010). However, this is unavoidable because one of the statutory rules of thesis writing is that the whole thesis must be

independently completed by the student and the researcher was informed of this rule during the first progress assessment meeting.

## **9.5 Future Directions**

This study assesses how OIM is practised by SMEs on social media and it also serves to spark further attempts to explore the focal phenomenon and other similar phenomena.

Firstly, future scholars are encouraged to delve the efficacy of SMEs' OIM enactment on social media. Aside from seeking answers to the stated queries, this study also, yet not in a comprehensive manner, sheds light on the efficacy of OIM on social media. The triangulation of the findings (i.e. based on the three datasets) indicates that the bulk of the OIM strategies identified are efficacious in general due to the 'evaluative mechanisms' in place (see *Chapter 7* for details). Even for SMEs that have normalised 'evaluation' as part of their daily social media practice (i.e. companies undergo a 'trial and error' process to discern what works and what does not), it still remains equivocal to gauge the efficacy of OIM strategies in projecting certain organisational impressions. For instance, a few questions are yet to be answered such as 'what are the most effective strategies to project a certain image', or 'what are the circumstances in which each OIM strategy is mostly likely to be adopted effectively'.

These queries might be escalated to a further level where holistic insights illustrated in *Chapter 8* also trigger broader speculations on SMEs' OIM efficacy on social media. For instance, one might wonder to what extent the disclosure of 'behind-the-scene' content is deemed optimally effective (i.e. being neither insufficient nor excessive). In this regard, this study is better understood as a starting point to spark studies that entail a more experimental approach to 'quantify' the extent to which each

identified OIM strategy has accomplished the predetermined goals without being submerged by the complexities of the inquired phenomenon. Such an approach requires access to the social media analytics and hence authorisation by sample cases. Nonetheless, given the experience of undertaking the current study, companies are usually reluctant to grant access to the statistics that measure the ‘engagingness’ of their social media activities. Thus, considerably greater rapport must be established between the researcher and the investigated cases. Moreover, a relatable direction is that practitioners may benefit from future scholarly endeavours that are intended to delve how OIM enactment associates with profitability of businesses or even what delimitates ‘good’ OIM for SMEs and how ‘good’ is sufficient to sustain and cement the long-term prosperity of businesses.

Secondly, provided some of the conspicuous structural similarities (e.g. both SMEs and large firms employ social media practitioners to determine and disclose content on organisational accounts) (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016), it is potentially lucrative to examine whether the findings of this thesis apply to an alternative sector. As discussed in *Chapter 8* (i.e. discussion), arts-based SMEs in the creative industries demonstrate certain features that might be uncommon outside the sector. For instance, SMEs in retail industry, in which competition is a prevailing feature, are unlikely to be engaged with the same level of collaborative practices. Hence, new insights may be drawn if the present findings can be compared and contrasted by studies revolving around a different sector (e.g. retail). More importantly, as stated in *Section 8.4.2*, this thesis has a rather homogeneous sample, indicating that OIM practice remains largely consistent across sample firms. Thus, the difference in relation to size among micro, small and medium firms is subtle and its influence on the OIM practice of these three classes of firms is minimal in this study. Nevertheless, existing literature suggests that

in in certain sectors size remains massively influential on various organisational qualities such as 1) the role of owner managers (e.g. Fleming, Lynch, & Kelliher, 2016); 2) internal organisation (e.g. Huang & Wang, 2012); 3) expertise in top management (e.g. Boonsiritomachai, McGrath, & Burgess, 2016); 4) strategic decision-making (e.g. Gibcus, Vermeulen, & Radulova, 2008); and 5) employee training and development (e.g. Coetzer, Redmond, & Sharafizad, 2012). Reasonably, OIM practice can be affected by these organisational qualities and therefore, future studies might benefit from investigating or even quantifying how firm size exerts an impact, if possible, upon OIM enactment (i.e. it might be viable to create logically consistent and empirically devised thresholds as to the interplay between firm size and OIM strategies). Another viable direction that is worth paying attention to is associated with the potential incongruence between the new and established firms. These two types of firms might exhibit different features such as capital acquisition (e.g. Van Auken, 2001; Seghers, Manigart, & Vanacker, 2012) and social media adoption (e.g. Macka, Marie-Pierreb, & Redican, 2017). Consequently, it is pivotal to understand how OIM evolves when SMEs progress into different phases in their process of development.

Finally, future research should explore, if any, negativity-laden strategies implemented by SMEs on social media. Since OIM strategies identified in the current study are mostly assertive and positivity-laden in nature (i.e. with only two exceptions of ‘apology’ and ‘nonresponse’), the findings mainly represent the firms’ endeavours to positivize their perceived impressions. However, not all firms are constantly perceived in a positive light and thus one may wonder if there will be any defensive mechanisms in place when SMEs are confronted with potential threats to their perceived images (e.g. misconducts such as scandals). More intriguingly, it is

potentially fruitful to delve what an SME would react, adopting defensive mechanisms, to the disputable incident of its partnering organisations on social media. It is noteworthy that the defensive mechanisms herein may vary from showing support to, and downplaying or terminating the collaboration with, the affected partners. Such inquiries into the defensive dimension are believed to enrich the existing body of OIM literature.

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## **APPENDIX: PROTOCOL FOR MULTIPLE-CASE STUDY**

The protocol elaborates the specific procedures and instructions of the multiple-case study approach adopted in this study, in order to offer a standardised form so that the approach can be replicated by other researchers. **Section A** specifies the data collection procedures that are followed in the fieldwork. **Section B** introduces the data analysis procedures used in thematising the collected data. **Section C** details the resources required for the fieldwork.

### **Section A – Data Collection Procedures**

#### *Research Questions & Corresponding Data Sources*

##### Phase 1 – firm manifestos

RQ1: How do SMEs desire to be perceived online (i.e. what are SMEs' desired organisational impressions/images online)?

Source: content posted on the official website of each sample firm

##### Phase 2 – Social media postings

RQ2: In order to shape the desired impressions/images online, what OIM strategies do SMEs employ on social media?

Source: content posted on the social media accounts of each sample firm

##### Phase 3 – key informant interviews

RQ3: What organisational qualities have affected SMEs' OIM practice on social media?

Source: semi-structured interview with a social media practitioner of each sample firm

### *Resources required for fieldwork*

- Pen
- Notebook
- Laptop/desktop
- Audio recorder (recording apps installed in smart phones or tablets)
- Consent form (provided in **Section C**)
- Participant information sheet (provided in **Section C**)
- Ethical approval (provided in **Section C**)
- Interview guide (provided in **Section C**)

### *Procedures for gaining informed consent (for **Phase 3** only)*

- Complete an ethics training and gain a certificate
- Apply for an ethical approval with completed application form, participant information sheet, and participant consent form
- Obtain an ethical approval from the ethics committee of University of Liverpool
- Provide the interviewees with a participant information sheet and request them to sign a participant consent form before they participate in the research.

### *Data collection activities*

Data collection is undertaken in three phases. The three phases can be undertaken concurrently or sequentially, depending on the choice of the researcher and availability of the research participants.

## Phase 1 – firm manifestos

- A manifesto is defined as a firm's self-reflection on its goal, mission, vision, value, history and work theme which are normally publicized under the section titled 'about us' and other equivalents such as 'heritage' and 'how we work';
- Visit each firm's official website;
- Click on 'about us' or any equivalent section which usually sits on the top left of the homepage;
- Cut and paste the text (i.e. including titles, sub-titles, and paragraphs) displayed on the page onto a word file which is later labelled as the manifesto script;
- In most occasions, a manifesto is segmented into multiple sub-sections and each one of them solely showcases a different aspect of the firm such as 'our history', 'our work', and 'what we do'. These sub-sections are all taken into account. However, in some rare occasions, the firm has already produced a copy of manifesto for others to download (e.g. **C3**). In this regard, a PDF version of the pre-written manifesto is downloaded and converted into a word file;
- A total of 8 word files are created and stored securely in the University's 'M' drive for further analysis.

## Phase 2 – social media postings

- Only regularly updated social media platforms (i.e. at least on a weekly basis) are deemed suitable for data collection;



- Data was collected from social media postings of each sample firms that were published from 1<sup>st</sup> Jun. 2016 to 30<sup>th</sup> Apr. 2017 (i.e. 8 months in total);
- Collect texts, images, gifs, videos, and even hyperlinks embedded in texts, which are considered as thematically relevant to OIM strategies, by means of screenshots;
- Each firm's screenshots are pasted onto a word file and securely stored in the University's 'M' drive for subsequent analysis.

### Phase 3 – key informant interviews

- Interviewees are selected based on their job description and duty to ensure that in-field experience can be reflected in the data;
- Interviews are semi-structured to allow flexibility and hence the researcher can have an opportunity to pursue a line of discussion opened up by interviewees;
- An interview guide is provided to interviewees prior to interviews;
- Interviews last approximately 50 – 80 minutes and are conducted at a time and place convenient for the interviewee;
- Interviews are audio-recorded and transcribed and interview transcripts are securely stored in the University's 'M' drive for subsequent analysis.

## **Section B – Data Analysis Procedures**

This study employs a qualitative thematic analysis to analyse the data collected from firm manifestos, social media postings, and key informant interviews. Thematic analysis for each dataset is initiated through the lens of the research questions specified in **Section A**. Purpose of the analysis is to identify the theoretical constructs, relationships, and patterns that can be used to answer the specified research questions, without subscribing to any theoretical preference or priori hypotheses. See *Table 5.4.5* for details of the procedures taken for the thematic analysis.

## Section C – Resources Required for Fieldwork

### Committee on Research Ethics

#### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

**Title of Research Project:** A research project investigating how SMEs manage their impressions on social media

**Researcher(s):** Chen Chen

**Please  
initial box**

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated [14/12/2016] for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my rights being affected. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
3. I understand that, under the Data Protection Act, I can at any time ask for access to the information I provide and I can also request the destruction of that information if I wish.
4. I agree to take part in the above study.

|  |               |                    |
|--|---------------|--------------------|
| _____<br>Participant Name              | _____<br>Date | _____<br>Signature |
| _____<br>Name of Person taking consent | _____<br>Date | _____<br>Signature |
| _____<br>Researcher                    | _____<br>Date | _____<br>Signature |

**Principal Investigator:**

Name

Work Address

Work Telephone

Work Email

**Student Researcher:**

Name: Chen Chen

Work Address: University of Liverpool, L69 3BX

Work Telephone: 07704315536

Work Email: c.chen9@liverpool.ac.uk

#### Optional Statements

- The information you have submitted will be published as a report; please indicate whether you would like to receive a copy.

☐

- I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me in any publications.

☐

- I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research and understand that any such use of identifiable data would be reviewed and approved by a research ethics committee.

☐

- I understand that my participation will be audio recorded and I am aware of and consent to your use of these recordings for the purpose of investigating the factors influencing SMEs' practice and strategizing of organizational impressions on social media.

☐

- I agree for the data collected from me to be used in relevant future research.

☐

- I would like my name used and understand what I have said or written as part of this study will be used in reports, publications and other research outputs so that anything I have contributed to this project can be recognised.

☐

- I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.

☐

- I understand that once I submit my data it will become anonymised and I will therefore no longer be able to withdraw my data.

☐

**FOR MARIARC PROJECTS ONLY:**

- I agree that my GP may be contacted if any unexpected results are found in relation to my health.

☐

# Participant Information Sheet



Study title: *A Research Project Investigating SMEs' Impression Management Behaviors on Social Media*

Locality: **Northwest of England**

Contact email address: **c.chen9@liverpool.ac.uk**

Lead investigator: **Chen Chen**

Contact phone number: **07704315536**

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask us if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand. You can reach us at (0044) 7704315536 or [c.chen9@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:c.chen9@liverpool.ac.uk).

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign the **Consent Form**. You will be given a copy of both the Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form to keep.

This document is **3** pages long, including the Consent Form. Please make sure you have read and understood all the pages.

Thank you for reading this.

## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND WHAT IS THE METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN?

There has been a constant growth of social media adoption among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Such a growth and what it has brought to the ways SMEs shape impressions in the eyes of their customers have been understudied. Hence, this study aims to explore how SMEs manage their impressions on social media. Two research questions have been established as follows: 1) how do SMEs practice and strategize organizational impressions on social media? And 2) what are the factors influencing SMEs' practice and strategizing of organizational impressions on social media?

To answer both research questions, a multiple-case study is employed. Datasets are established through: 1) social media postings of each firm selected; and 2) semi-structured interviews. These two datasets (secondary social media data and interview data) will be analysed using thematic analysis. You are invited to only take part in the interviews.

In addition to its theoretical contribution, this study also expects to offer recommendations to practice in relation to how SMEs could capitalise on social media adoption by engaging with customers more effectively.

### **WHY HAVE I BEEN SELECTED AND WHAT WILL MY PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY INVOLVE?**

You have been chosen based on the following criteria (all the criteria are established based on the information provided by a database named 'FAME'):

- Your firm is a small and medium-sized business (the number of employees is between 1 and 249);
- Your firm is established in an industry where social media adoption is widely adopted for business purposes (code 90: 'Creative, Arts, and Entertainment Activities' as categorised by UK SIC 2007);
- Your firm is located in the Northwest of England; and
- You are in charge of managing social media postings on behalf of your firm.

If you decide to participate, we will arrange an interview where you are able to share your experience of how you manage social media postings to reach and impress your customers. A list of questions will be emailed to you prior to the interview, giving sufficient time for you to prepare your answers. A tape recorder or an equivalent device will be used to record the interview with your agreement. This interview will take no more than one hour of your time and it will take place anywhere and anytime you feel comfortable.

### **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS AND RISKS OF THIS STUDY?**

The potential benefit for your participation is that you will have full access to the findings of this study that cover a minimum of 10 firms (anonymised) with similar background and this hopefully will help you to effectively engage with customers in the future.

This study has no detectable risks. If you experience any discomfort or disadvantage during an interview, this should be made known to the researcher immediately and can decide whether you will continue or withdraw from the study.

### **WHO PAYS FOR THE STUDY?**

This study is part of a self-sponsored PhD research project. No other funding bodies are involved. Thus, the findings of this study will not be used for commercial purposes. In addition, no expenses will be imposed on you.

### **WHAT IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG?**

If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let us know by contacting the researcher [Chen Chen: 0044 7704315536] and we will try to help. If

you remain unhappy or consider filing a complaint, you should contact the Research Governance Officer at [ethics@liv.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@liv.ac.uk). When contacting the Research Governance Officer, please provide details of the name or description of the study (so that it can be identified), the researcher involved, and the details of the complaint you wish to make.

#### **WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS AND WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE STUDY?**

Although your participation will be voluntary, we would highly value your contribution to this important study. If you decide to take part in this study, you are free to withdraw at any time without explanation. No disadvantage will be incurred upon withdrawal. Information you provided up to the period of withdrawal may be used, but, you can request that this information be destroyed and no further use will be made of them.

The interview will be securely recorded, transcribed, and stored (in the University of Liverpool's 'M drive'). Data collected from the interview will not be disclosed without your consent. The final results will be anonymised (replace your name with a number such as interviewee No. 1) and hence you will not be identified. Also, the final results of the study will be shared with you prior to using them in publications.

13 January 2017

Dear Dr Jayawarna,

I am pleased to inform you that your application for research ethics approval has been approved. Details and conditions of the approval can be found below:

Reference: 1424

Project Title: A research project investigating how small firms manage their impressions on social media

Principal Investigator/Supervisor: Dr Dilani Jayawarna

Co-Investigator(s): Mr Chen Chen

Lead Student Investigator: -

Department: Organisation and Management

Reviewers: Prof Gary Cook, Dr David Brookfield

Approval Date: 13/01/2017

Approval Expiry Date: Five years from the approval date listed above

The application was **APPROVED** subject to the following conditions:

**Conditions**

- All serious adverse events must be reported via the Research Integrity and Ethics Team ([ethics@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@liverpool.ac.uk)) within 24 hours of their occurrence.
- If you wish to extend the duration of the study beyond the research ethics approval expiry date listed above, a new application should be submitted
- If you wish to make an amendment to the research, please create and submit an amendment form using the research ethics system.
- If the named Principal Investigator or Supervisor leaves the employment of the University during the course of this approval, the approval will lapse. Therefore it will be necessary to create and submit an amendment form using the research ethics system.
- It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator/Supervisor to inform all the investigators of the terms of the approval.

Kind regards,

University of Liverpool Management School Committee on Research Ethics

J.S.Roberts@liverpool.ac.uk

0151 795 3609



## **Interview Guide**

Interview number:

Date:

Time:

Location:

Please answer the following questions in your own words and ask me to explain anything you do not understand.

### **Section A – This section looks at your personal characteristics as being a social media practitioner for your company**

**Q1:** What's your job title and what's your role in your firm? How long have you been doing this job?

**Q2:** What did you do before taking this job? Were you familiar with social media before you started managing social media postings for your firm? Has your previous experience influenced the way you manage social media accounts at the moment?

**Q3:** Did you receive any formal/informal training about how to run social media accounts?

**Q4:** Why were you appointed the job (e.g. skills, experience, or any other personal qualities that are suitable for the job)?

**Q5:** Do you have your own personal social media accounts? If so, what social media sites do you normally use and how many hours do you spend roughly on social media per day?

**Q6:** Is there any difference between managing your personal accounts and the firm accounts in terms of, for instance, style or frequency?

### **Section B – This section looks at social media management in your company**

**Q7:** Could you please describe in details what you do on a daily basis in terms of managing social media activities?

**Q8:** Is there any rule or protocol in terms of running social media accounts? For instance, do you need to post a certain number of posts per day?

**Q9:** Do you normally seek feedback from customers regarding what they think of your social media postings? In other words, how do you know if your customers are going to like what you have posted? If so, what do you do with the feedback?

**Q10:** Do you follow other organisations on social media? What are they? Why do you follow their regular updates?

**Section C – This section looks at social media as a tool for your daily operations**

**Q11:** What things do you normally post on social media?

**Q12:** Based on what criteria do you decide what should be put on social media?

**Q13:** What kind of people you want to engage on social media?

**Q14:** Are there any specific features of social media you find quite useful?

**Q15:** Are there any difficulties you have experienced using social media to engage with customers?

**Section D – This section looks at your thoughts on using social media to make desired impressions**

**Q16:** What kind of impressions you want to make in the eyes of your customers on social media? In other words, what kind of impressions you want your customers to have when they are browsing your homepage and reading through your posts?

**Q17:** Do you have any specific strategies to make the desirable impressions on social media?